

Opening Scripture: Acts 11:15-18 Peter Explained: “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came down on them, just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If, then, God gave them the same gift that he also gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?” ¹⁸ When they heard this they became silent. And they glorified God, saying, “So then, God has given repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles.”

Introduction: Everyone loves a good mystery. The surprising **mystery** of the Gospel, however, is that God had always intended to save *even the* Gentile nations—to bring these people back into the fold, into his holy family. Out of these two peoples God would create one new humanity, Jew and Gentile saved in the Messiah. Jesus said that when the Spirit of God, when He is poured out on us—rivers of living water will flow.

In this town every year we experience the diversion of water from the river into our canal systems all around town so that farms and fields can have the life-giving water necessary for crops to grow and for the produce to flourish.

The Holy Spirit like a raging river overflowing its banks has been poured in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria—7 years later He begins to cut channels into increasingly distant communities. To bring those thirsty dry souls the life of heaven. To bring those households and communities and towns the transforming power of God's grace.

Beginning in 11:19 we find that the river of life—God's life-giving Holy Spirit begins to make lasting and permanent inroads into the Gentile world.

Transition: In this message the gospel is going to relentlessly forge ahead despite the reluctance of God's people.

1. The gospel most often advances by unnamed champions.

11:20-21

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. (So, they're making inroads into Gentile cities and territories—but reluctant to preach the Gospel TO the Gentiles. As we'll see, God has other plans)...

²⁰ But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord

The text says, “men from Cyprus and Cyrene.” But we don't know their names.

The church is built on the foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets with Jesus Christ as it's cornerstone. But it did not end with the laying of the foundation. It grew steadily, mightily and quite unexpectedly.

God is now, and has been for 1,973 years, building on that foundation through the countless testimonies and conversations of ordinary Christians. Everyday folk like us.

Example. As a preacher of the Gospel in America—where there has been an oversaturation of the message—I have come to the sobering reality that every word I ever write, every sermon I ever give, everything I ever do will disappear in the dust of history. A generation from now, when we are all in heavenly glory with Christ, no one will know that I even existed. That's a very humbling thing to realize. It's sobering because it reminds us that God buries the man but the work continues.

The unnamed disciples who proclaimed the Gospel and dialogued with their pagan neighbors are the key to world evangelism. God builds on that foundation through countless unknown people and they are the crucial to evangelizing the world.

But we are their heritage nevertheless. **The Gospel most often advances through countless and nameless champions.**

2. The Spirit cannot be controlled, though the work of the Spirit requires management. That happens through leaders.

We'll meet a man named Barnabas who was a key leader in transitioning Paul into the church and the Gentiles too.

11:22-24. News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.

a. The presence of the Lord is the key to faithfulness and fruitfulness. Verse 21 says the Lord's hand (a metaphor for his power) was with the believers who went into these Gentile cities—the result was that a large number of people turned to God.

Does God care about Church growth? Absolutely he does. Acts has many such summary statements of the growth of the church as many were added to their number. But God has called us to be faithful when we don't always see the immediate payoff or response to our efforts.

Take Paul for example in Acts 17 in Athens. In the previous Greek cities of Thessalonica and Berea, Paul had great success in establishing churches. After Athens he will go on to establish churches in Corinth and many other cities where he experiences marvelous success in the Gospel. People—disciples being made. Sure his preaching started a riot and he was run out of those towns. But the churches he established in those regions, including Samothrace and Philippi were going strong. The gospel was welcomed.

But in Athens? Not so much. Now, this is Paul at his finest. In a debate forum, proving from reason, poetry, artifacts, and Scripture that the God of the Jews has revealed himself finally in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And the response? Meh...three people are converted and it looks for all the world like Paul is a failure in Athens. Where's the fruit?

Fast forward a few decades, nearly a century—Athens produces some of the finest Christian apologists who argue powerfully for the Christian faith writing letters to Roman Emperors. And the church? By 139 the church has become so prominent in Greece that the Bishop of Rome sends them a letter to congratulate them but was puzzled why the church produced no martyrs for the faith. Their answer: our persecution is of a more scholastic and social nature.

Don't think for a second that all God cares about is numbers. He does care about that. The fact that the church grew in large numbers is mentioned three times in this passage alone (vv. 21, 24, 26). But God is playing the long game. God has taken the long view—and God knows the power of a seed that gets sown in fertile soil.

The Lord's hand was with them come what may. And sometimes you're faithful and fruitful. Praise God! And sometimes your faithful and the seeds of your faithfulness will not be reaped during your tenure as a mom, a dad, an elder, a company man...you stay faithful no matter what the outcome.

b. The news about Antioch necessitated a response from Jerusalem. 11:22 "News about them reached the church in Jerusalem," They have a reputation of being an infectious gospel community. They have fled the Sanhedrin's persecution after Stephen's death—they had incubated in the Jerusalem church for some time. Now they are back out into the blood stream of the Roman empire and their effect on the culture is undeniable. News has reached as far as Jerusalem and the news is good.

Illus. When I first came to Christ I was a part of the fastest growing and well-known Church in Richmond VA. Back then there was only one other "Mega-church" in town and it was the Baptist church next door, and they had been around for a long time. The church I attended was right next door and we were the fastest growing church in Richmond and two groups of friends took notice: Friends in my Christian circles and my secular unsaved classmates and coworkers.

I took some time last week and thought about, "What reputation do I want CCC to have in this community? What's the first thought I'd like for people to have when they hear or think of us?" I want this church to have the reputation in the community of being unwavering in its faithfulness to the Gospel and persistently friendly to people who don't believe it yet. I want to be the most faithful and friendliest church in the history of this city.

c. The Jerusalem Church's response was to send a trusted leader. 11:22b "and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch...²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

Trusted Leadership is vital to the health and expansion of the Church. Barnabas has a reputation—his real name is Yoseph and those that know him have designated him ***Barnabba*** meaning **"the son of prophets" or in Greek "the son of encouragement."** The Jerusalem HQ sends a man who by this time is well-known to the scattered Jews and is described in the text as "good and full of the Holy Spirit and faith." The Spirit's obvious presence in his life and his intense faith in the Lord is the well-spring, it is in fact the source of the goodness that he exudes to everyone; the spring of his decency and dignity. His faith in the Lord Jesus is evident to everyone. They send a trustworthy man to this new church community.

There are few things more comforting to a congregation than faithful, trustworthy leaders—good people.

d. Barnabas provided accountability and encouragement. First of all, no doubt he was sent to verify that the work in Antioch was of the Lord. He was sent there to observe what was going on. Barnabas was a Greek speaking Jew from Cyprus.

How far away are we talking here? Now just imagine that Idaho Falls is Jerusalem and Boise is Antioch. Now, imagine that we have their limitations in travel. Get up tomorrow and start walking to Boise. I looked it up on my GPS and it would take you 3 days and 15 hours. This feels like a very far away. And if the Gospel has gone this far—out into the sea on the island of Cyprus or Crete—as far north east as Antioch—this will feel like another world to you. No doubt he was sent there to affirm continuity, to observe this rumored revival and report back to Jerusalem. **But he also provided encouragement, exhortation, and support.** This is the dual role of leadership. We provide accountability to God's Word, we provide encouragement and instruction for the health and growth of God's church.

e. He observed the grace of God among them. 11:23 "When he arrived and saw the grace of God,"

What did he observe? The grace of the Lord Jesus being poured out on this community. Antioch was a strategic city in the Roman Empire—the third largest. It was an epicenter of Sports boasting the largest venue for Chariot racing.

This is like ancient Nascar (or Naschariots). Antioch was a **cultural center** where residents worshiped the **sex goddess Daphne** who was served by a host of temple priestesses who were temple prostitutes. It is also the place of a **massive migration.** Greeks who were fed up with the nonsense of Greek and Roman pagan religion moved there and converted in droves to the belief and value system of Judaism. There was a large Jewish population in Antioch. **Barnabas observed the effects of God's grace among them.** A gracious, growing, vibrant church community for Jesus. A Church where prostitutes and idolaters are coming to faith in Jesus in droves. A messy church no doubt. But a church nonetheless—where the Spirit of God was moving and working in lives.

Application: The Question for us is “What is there to see at Christ Community Church?”

f. He delighted over the grace of God: 11:23b “he was glad” This is why we celebrate and worship God while parents and pastors are baptizing people in this church. Baptisms are both a funeral service and a resurrection service. They should have both the seriousness of confession of Christ (which we do by video testimony). This person who is being baptized is signifying, symbolizing their death to their old life and slavery to sin. And we are celebrating with glad hearts the resurrection and rebirth that this baptism symbolizes.

Scripture: As an example of this, Israel’s feasts were celebrations. Moses said of the Passover meal in

Exod 12:14 “This day is to be a memorial for you, and you must **celebrate** it as a festival to the Lord. You are to **celebrate** it throughout your generations as a permanent statute.”

And again in

Exod 23:14 “**Celebrate** a festival in my honor three times a year.” The Jews are told 8 different times in the Pentateuch (first five) to celebrate these festivals in honor of himself. Jesus is the fulfillment of all these things. How much more should we celebrate Christ with glad hearts.

Psa 68:3, 4 “But the righteous are glad; they rejoice before God and **celebrate** with joy. Sing to God! Sing praises to his name. Exalt him who rides on the clouds— his name is the Lord—and **celebrate** before him.”

Of course, there is time for everything under the sun. There is a time to mourn, a time laugh and a time to weep. But when repentant sinners who were far from God and without Christ and without hope in this world come to Jesus—clap your hand all ye people shout unto God with the voice of praise!

g. He encouraged the believers to remain faithful to Jesus. 11:23c “and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts” Jesus had a lot to say about remaining in him and his teachings. “Remain in me” Jesus said, “And you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.” **Leaders are there to encourage the faithful to remain faithful. Why should that be part of our God-given calling?** Because life is hard. Between now and the moment you go home to glory—the devil will throw everything he can at you. Life (wholly apart from Satan’s effort or intention) will present daunting, heartbreaking challenges to your faith. Listen, Barnabas was encouraged by the Antioch congregation—but he also needed to encourage them to remain faithful.

h. He sought reinforcements. 11:25-26 “Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.” **He found Saul/Paul and for a year the two of them met with the church and taught large groups of people, instructing them in the faith.**

All of this converges in the name “Christian.” (*Χριστιανοί*) in Greek literally means “The Christ Partisans.” Political followers of Herod were called *the Herodians* (*Ἡρωδιανοί*) followers of Nero were called *Neronians*, and worshipers of Caesar called the *Caesarians*.

The term “Christian” was at first a scornful term—a label given to disciples of Jesus to brand them as social outcasts.¹

But this new party began was associated with a dying King—sacrificing himself for humanity. Being called a Christian means I have no other loyalties that run contrary to my loyalty to Christ.

Application:

- **Be a faithful witness for Christ, leave the outcome to the Holy Spirit.** A faithful witness prays, shares, and reaps the harvest. Jesus said, “the fields are ready, ripe for harvest—pray for laborers.” Being a faithful witness requires doing the hard work of praying, sharing the gospel and our lives as well. It requires the work of sowing and the discernment to know when to reap.
- **Be willing and open to the Spirit leading you in a direction that you hadn’t anticipated.** We do our part to plan and work the harvest, God is Sovereign—he is the Lord of the Harvest. So we must remain flexible and refuse to become entrenched in old wine skins that can’t accommodate the new work that God might be doing among us.
- **Lean on and submit to your leaders.** Don’t go it alone. The Church in Antioch had the Holy Spirit but they also needed Barnabas and Paul to instruct, train, and prepare them for Godliness. To be equipped with all they needed to be spiritually formed into the image of Christ.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary & 2: Introduction and 1:1–14:28*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012–2013), 1849. A Pompeian graffito (dated between 62 and 79 c.e.) uses the name to ridicule Christ’s followers (*CIL* 4.679).