

The Irrepressible Gospel

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] does it sometimes bother you how uncoordinated the church is? Or at least puzzled. Like for instance, why is there so many denominations?

So that even in a suburb, one suburb, you have many churches right next door to each other, doing their own thing, not working together.

And you know, sometimes they're even of the same denomination. What about mission organizations? Why are there so many? Like CMS and then Pioneers.

Or on student campuses, so many ministries. Well, maybe just two at the moment. Christian Union, power to change.

Why do you, when you start uni, have to choose, make that agonizing choice? Am I going to power to change your Christian Union? Surely, if they join forces, more could be done.

[1 : 06] It would show that the church is united. Or maybe, maybe, only one's approved by God. The other ones are fake, imposters. I don't think so.

But as we look in the book of Acts, we find that this thing is not new, is it, in the church? You know, you might expect, for example, that once the Holy Spirit was given in Acts chapter 1, you know, that the preaching of the gospel would just be a bit more coordinated.

You know, that we will have it coming from the apostles in Jerusalem. Maybe they would write up a plan. They would allocate the resources. They would assign responsibilities.

You know, you go here, you go there. That's all you know. Let's not overlap and, you know, step on each other's toes. You know, if they coordinate things better, things would be more efficient, wouldn't it?

And orderly. But that's not how it's happened, has it? So even here in verse 19 of chapter 11, we read that, Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke up when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among the Jews.

[2 : 18] None of this was planned, was it? Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch are now places in the Roman world, far away from Jerusalem and Judea. But it's the persecution that prompted this, isn't it?

Initially, they had only spread the word to the Jews. But then some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news of Jesus.

You know, someone just said, Oh, look, it's a good idea now. Why don't we just talk to the Greeks as well? The Greeks being the non-Jews that spoke Greek as well. So it doesn't seem that any of these events are coordinated.

Nor does it seem that it's related to Peter's encounter with Cornelius last week. You would have thought, again, that Peter now, that spirit has poured out, God has poured out his spirit to the Gentiles, that Peter now would coordinate how the Gentiles would be reached.

But we don't really know whether this incident here occurred before or after Peter's trip, or whether it was sort of independent of each other. But to God, it sort of really doesn't matter.

[3 : 32] And we can tell in verse 21, because the Lord's hand was with them. And a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Those who were scattered didn't ask or need permission from the apostles to do this.

The Lord grew the church organically. Anyway, what matters was that people were now receiving God's word and turning to the Lord as a result. The Lord was blessing their work.

And so we see this rather uncoordinated and random spread, don't we, of God's word. But alongside that, in the next section, we see also intentional building of God's church.

So verse 22, news of this reached the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. So the leaders in Jerusalem, they didn't get angry over this and go, hey, hang on, no one consulted us about this.

[4 : 40] Barnabas, you better go up there and put a stop to this work. No, instead, they responded to a need, didn't they? They sent Barnabas to Antioch, firstly to verify what's happened, but then Barnabas encouraged and built them up, telling them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

And I think that's such a beautiful phrase, isn't it? Barnabas, the son of encouragement, was telling them to stay firm in the gospel, but to do it with their whole heart.

That's a beautiful phrase, isn't it? Do it wholeheartedly. And the result was that more people then were brought to the Lord. And then Barnabas, looking at the situation, more people coming now, he thought, hang on, I can't do this alone.

I need some help. And then he goes, ah, I remember Saul has gone to Tarsus, right? So let me go there to get him to come.

And as you can see from the map, it just so turned out that Tarsus is not that far from Antioch. So verse 25, Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.

[5 : 51] So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. And so even though the spread of God's word to Antioch was organic, what occurs afterward was more intentional.

I see that what Barnabas has done is set up a Bible school, graduate diploma of Bible and ministry for one year. Great numbers of people were trained, weren't they?

And the church was built up. And they grew to such a point that it's in Antioch that the disciples first became known as Christians. Christianos, sort of little Christians, or the way little Christ, not Messiah, but little Christians of resemblances of Jesus, the Messiah.

And this is significant because it would seem that for the first time, we have Jewish and Gentile believers coming together to form a new identity. See, up to now, I think perhaps the few Gentiles that became Christians were joining the Jews at the temple, right?

But here, I think they're forming a distinct body, visible and united in their faith, by their faith in Jesus. And often, it's only when things reach a critical mass that you begin to give things a name or label people with a title or name.

[7 : 23] So I'll give you an example. It's a bit like bike riding. Not that I have a personal interest in this, but, you know, in recent times, I don't know whether you've noticed, I'm sure you did, there has been a trend of middle-aged men wanting to get fit.

You know, maybe try and get rid of their bare belly or something like that. And so some of them take to bike riding. You know, then it gets a bit more serious.

Some of you might sort of start getting a bit of resonance in what you're doing yourself. You know, they start forming riding groups that might ride, you know, on a Sunday morning to get coffee, of course, more than riding, but anyway.

And then they start swapping stories about, you know, what they ought to wear, the riding attire that best, you know, and maybe even order online a jersey that had HDD on the side.

And so this sort of all starts happening, you know, a phenomenon around Melbourne, Australia, around, you know, various parts of, until it got so common that someone then gives them a name.

[8 : 30] All right. Some of you will know this name. Anyone know what the name of this sort of men are? Someone? Yeah. How do you spell it? Correct.

So next slide. Middle-aged man in Lycra. Mammals. That's right. In fact, Victor's not here, but he only recently discovered what this stands for.

I think it was because you may be thinking he's approaching middle age himself. But the same is sort of happening here with the disciples, isn't it? They had grown to the point that they were obviously attracting attention.

And therefore, people were giving them a distinctive name. But whatever the, however it came about, God's spirit, we can see, it's at work, isn't it?

We can see him raising up Barnabas, a man full of the Holy Spirit, who then seeks out Saul. And then together, they come together, bring people together, and teach them God's word for a whole year.

[9 : 33] It's all intentional and quite methodical, isn't it? And the fruit of their work is seen in the next segment because these Christians then express their unity by supporting God's people, not just in their local church, but across the empire.

So we now read in verse 27, during this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.

This happened during the reign of Claudius. The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for their brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

And so here we again see both organic and intentional ministry, isn't it? The apostles or the prophets coming seems a bit, you know, random again. Then Agabus standing up, something prompted by the spirit, unplanned.

But then we then see intentional ministry. The brothers and sisters in Antioch coming together and saying that they will help their counterparts living in Judea and then sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

[10 : 50] Now I'm pretty sure that these brothers and sisters in Antioch or these Christians in Antioch didn't really know their brothers and sisters living in Judea.

It's not like they've traveled there, met up, said hi. The only reason why they have this connection is through Agabus but also because of Barnabas' ministry that coming from Jerusalem he would have taught them what it meant to become part of God's people.

that you're not just a church in Antioch but you belong to the church across the world. And for us that's not very different isn't it?

We often pray for our gospel partners whom we haven't met. So we pray for Matt and Kate Vinicum whom we've met but we also pray for the church in Good Island for Gwangwa which we don't know who she is do we really?

We've not really met her and yet we pray for her by name don't we? Gillian sometimes sends out her prayer letters we know Gillian but we don't really know some of the people that she names for us to pray for and yet we pray for them by name as though not as though because they are part of God's church.

[12 : 06] So this is really an outworking of the gospel isn't it? That once we're taught we see ourselves as part of Christ's body and that we express this unity by caring and praying and trying to meet each other's need even though we're far away.

And so what we see here again is God doing his work even though it may look uncoordinated God is raising up one part of the church to serve another part. God is overseeing everything isn't he? And ultimately even though no one individual or one group is in control we know we know that the Holy Spirit is the one that is in control. He's the one that prompts people to do this or that work going to the right place at the right time and making sure that God's work is done.

And so as a result what we see is the gospel is irrepressible isn't it? It cannot be stopped even when as we now see rulers like Herod try to stop it.

You may think that that might stop the progress of the gospel but as we will see the spirit merely uses it and works around it so that the gospel or the word of God keeps spreading.

[13 : 22] So let's get to chapter 12 where we see a different picture now as the incident has now gone back to Jerusalem or the focus where we see Herod as the enemy of the gospel trying to stop the apostles.

So verse 1 it was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church intending to persecute them He had James the brother of John put to death with a sword when he saw that this met with approval among the Jews he proceeded to seize Peter also This happened during the festival of unleavened bread After arresting him he put him in prison handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover Now I think Luke writes it in a way to draw attention really to some of the parallels between this account and Jesus' own arrest So for example it happens around the same time for both of the Passover Herod like Pilate does things to please the Jews Like John the Baptist and

Jesus we again here have two people James and Peter James like John doesn't escape death Peter on the other hand is arrested and is awaiting trial just as Jesus did And if you look at this incident humanly you would think that this would be a big disaster for the church wouldn't you? Peter, James and John are the three key leaders among the apostles James dead Peter about to follow shortly perhaps So two out of three that's a real existential threat to the survival of the church don't you think?

So it would appear and so verse 5 while Peter was being kept in prison the church earnestly prayed to God for him Now Peter on the other hand seems to be at peace with it all because we read that the night before Herod was to bring him to trial Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains and sentries stood God at the entrance Now I'm pretty sure that if I was put in this situation sleep is not something I'll be doing I don't know what I'll be doing but I don't think I'll be as calm as Peter was But notice how heavily guarded he is as well One soldier on either side two at the entrance and there are four such squads we read earlier each taking turn to guard Peter It's almost like he's the Osama bin Laden kind of prized asset for Herod and maybe Herod I don't know had a sense that God might attempt a jailbreak for Peter

Maybe he remembered what happened to Jesus you know how he was in the tomb guarded by the Roman soldiers and yet still Jesus escaped Well by luck for Herod he was right Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell He struck Peter on the side and woke him up Quick Get up he said and the chains fell off Peter's wrist Then the angel said to him Put on your clothes and sandals and Peter did so Wrap your cloak around you and follow me The angel told him Peter followed him out of Sorry the angel told him Peter followed him out of the prison but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening He thought he was seeing a vision They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city It opened for them by itself and they went through it When they had walked the length of one street Suddenly the angel left him Now all this caught even Peter by surprise didn't it because he thought he was just seeing a vision and of course he's been having a few visions of light

[17:15] But when he found himself standing in a dark street all alone it finally dawned on him that this was all real So he says Now I know without doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen When this had dawned on him he went to the house of Mary the mother of John also called Mark where many people had gathered and were praying Peter knocked at the outer entrance and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door Now when she recognized Peter's voice she was overjoyed she ran back without opening and exclaimed Peter is at the door Now of course this is just a mere servant so what weight does her words carry You're out of your mind he told her but when she kept insisting it was so they said it's just an angel Now Peter kept knocking and then when finally they opened the door and saw him they were astonished Peter mentioned with his hand motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had

Is that the mic? Where was I?

Described how the Lord had brought him out of prison Sounded like a jailbreak Tell James that is the brother of Jesus not the one just killed and the other brothers and sisters about this he said and then he left for another place Now I don't think that Peter here was running away from Herod in fear I think he was just doing it to get away just so as to spare the church another repeat of Herod having to sort of arrest him again Now in the morning there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter After Herod had a thorough search made of him and did not find him he cross-examined the guards poor guards and ordered that they be executed Didn't stand a chance did they?

It's again another contrast isn't it because if you remember when Jesus wasn't found in the tomb those soldiers got paid off with a bribe to fabricate a story These guys sad to say they got the chop instead Now I'm pretty sure that if God hadn't rescued Peter that you know that actually the gospel would have kept spreading anyway right We've already seen that Stephen was martyred but that didn't stop the gospel So yes God raises up men and women to do his will but ultimately God is sovereign and all attempts to defeat his work will be futile whether Peter died or not nothing would have stopped God's gospel from continuing to spread In fact James did die didn't he?

So even in the one account we find that God did save some and didn't save others But the point is this God I think allowed Peter to be rescued this time so as to encourage him and his church to know that he's actually watching over them But for God's enemies even though they fail God still

will not allow what they do to his people to go unpunished Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there

[21 : 10] He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon They now joined together and sought an audience with him After securing the support of Luscious a trusted personal servant of the king they asked for peace because they depended on the king's country for their food supply On the appointed day Herod wearing his royal robes sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people They shouted this is the voice of a God not of a man immediately because Herod did not give praise to God an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms and died I sort of you know in one sense it is sad what happens to Herod but it's not surprising to me is it and I think Luke again draws a few contrasts for us to see firstly if you recall whereas earlier God had forewarned his people about the famine and had this beautiful picture of providing for the people one part of the church helping another church here we see Herod squabbling or the people of

Tyre and Sidon squabbling with Herod their king over food maneuvering you know getting blasters to sort of get an audience so that they can get their food very big contrast isn't it between one king generous king providential king and then this other king last week as well we saw Peter going to Caesarea didn't we to facilitate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles here Herod goes to the same place but the outcome is not good is it and the only thing that's on Herod's mind is his own ego then we also see that the people shouted this is the voice of a God now they couldn't be more mistaken but by contrast if you again remember Cornelius last week a devout God-fearing man who was generous to the poor he too heard the voice of

God except this is the true voice of God and instead of being struck down by an angel Cornelius and his family were blessed and welcomed into God's kingdom whereas Herod in the meantime is eaten by worms and dies now if you read verse 23 it's very clear what Herod's error was isn't it he did not praise God did not give praise to God was the reason why God struck him down again there's a difference isn't there when you compare it to Cornelius because when he received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues he praised God wholeheartedly so the true reason for Herod's judgment actually yes he persecuted the church but the true underlying reason why he did that was that he failed to praise God he was proud he was not humble he was only concerned for his ego that's why we read he kept persecuting the church didn't he because it gained the approval of the Jews he made him look good it consolidated his power underneath all his actions you can see is pride isn't it and his persecution of the church although evil is just a result of that pride and so I think that's a warning for all of us isn't it now our judgment may not always look like Herod but if we fail to humble ourselves and acknowledge God as the father of our Lord Jesus Christ then even though it may not be in this life one day we will have to stand before God at his throne and answer as to what we've done with our knowledge of God well let's finish on a more positive note because verse 25 concludes I think pretty much where we began it says in just one short sentence but tells you all about Herod and how he dies and the worm and all that kind of stuff and then this beautiful sentence but the word of God continued to spread and flourish you know it's almost what happened with Herod that's like a little sort of bit of a dust on God's shoulders washes it off and the word of God continues to spread and flourish at the start of the passage we had them spreading the word only to the Jews right here at the end we have the word of God continuing to spread and flourishing so kings come and kings go kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall but

God's word continues to spread and flourish and it was true then and it is true right now as well and God's kingdom God's word doesn't expand by the power of the sword it doesn't expand by the brilliance of a strategic plan well executed by having by having a great pope or archbishop coordinating whatever ministry and yes although God will raise up women and men to do his work ultimately it's God's word that grows and sustains his church and if you read all throughout Acts the power of the Holy Spirit goes hand in hand with the power of God's word the active and living word of God is what God's spirit uses to build and sustain his church and so that's why I chose a reading from Isaiah today Isaiah 55 10 and 11 as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so is my word that goes out from my mouth it will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which

[27 : 17] I sent it and that to me those words as well as what we read in Acts is such an encouragement isn't it because God will continue to cause his word to spread and flourish and we just need to be encouraged to be part of that it's not going to be down to some great strategic plan

or fulfilling our church vision even though that's based on God's word it's not all down to that but our work is just to be faithful to spread God's word and God will spread it and cause it to flourish that is God's strategic plan if you like that's the way he works using his word by his spirit so let me encourage you when you're meeting together and you look into your word when you're going out to share the word with your friends and colleagues talking to your family doing kids church as a leader or HTY doing walk up events on campuses whatever it is and sometimes you may not be doing that but supporting others by prayer take heart that God's word will continue to spread and flourish as we do it so you know in a sense we don't need to be too concerned why there is you know part of change and Christian union there'll be

God will raise up all these entities and people as and when he will God's spirit does the coordinating we don't need to be concerned but you know as and when we see that there are people and organizations doing and spreading God's word then yes if God puts it in your heart to pray and support them do that sometimes it may be this rather than that that's okay you can't do everything but know that when God's people are doing these things then God will use that to spread his word to cause it to flourish so that the kingdom of God the church of God will be built up and sustained let's pray father thank you that your word is spreading across the world spreading across time thank you that it accomplishes what you desire it does not return to you void father may it do its work in our lives and may we join in spreading it wherever we live and work in Jesus name we pray amen not you