

Expansion Means Opposition

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[0 : 0 0] We pray the collect for the second Sunday in Advent. Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen. Please sit down. It would be great if you took your Bible and opened back to Acts chapter 11 on page 1, 2, 3.

This week I received a personal invitation to a conference titled The Emotionally Healthy Church. And I want you all to go and to come back because it will make me feel better.

I was born in 1957, very important year. It was the first year that church growth, the first church growth school was established in Eugene, Oregon, just across the border.

And in the 60s it moved to Los Angeles to Fuller Seminary. And over the last 28 years it has become a massive growth industry.

[1 : 3 1] I think it started with good motives. The idea was to look at large churches and to see what they did that were working and to look at small churches and to see what things they did that were not working.

And almost every pastor's conference I've read about and gone to in the past 10 years in North America and most of the books that come out for pastors in North America have titles like this, The Ten Marks of the Happy and Effective Church or The Ten Marks of the Fabulously Large and Prosperous Church.

You won't quite say it like that, but that's the kind of direction, The Twenty Marks of the Dynamic Growing Groovy Church. And you can get churches for anything. There are leading-edge churches, there are millennialist churches, there are Generation X, there are baby boomer churches.

The latest thing is called the Emerging Church. And that is church for post-moderns. And they take a little bit of this and a little bit of that and they come up with a mission statement.

Here's one I can quote to you. This is a church mission statement. Our faith is ancient, our faith is future, we're old-fashioned, we're newfangled, we're orthodox, we're innovators, we're post-modern Christians.

[2 : 3 9] It has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Room under the sign, outside. If the Emerging Church, there are a number of key words to pick up on.

Dream is one of them, spirit, new wave, resonant. My favourite is the ooze. That is, the ooze is quantum servanthood.

I thought you might know what that was. Actually, I shouldn't tell you this, but I was looking at a resource on this called Alternative Worship.

And the idea basically is to use digital format in Alternative Worship. And so, this was from England. And what they advised was that you hang up screens over 15th century stained glass windows so that you can project onto the screens.

And as I was reading this resource, a little bit further down on the page, there was advice on what kind of ambient picture to put up on the screen. And the advice this guy gives is, put up pictures of 15th century stained glass windows.

[3 : 49] I'm not lying to you. It's a true story. Now, most of the pastors' conferences in the States today and over the last 10 years, I think are basically arranged to feed the anxiety and insecurity of ministers.

Tell them that if only they could master this latest method, they too could have a fabulously successful and full church.

Despite the fact that, do you know what the average size of congregations meeting in North America today is? It's 73. 73. Anglicans, of course, are 60 and declining.

But I want to say three things, just to get this off my chest. The first is, big is not necessarily good or even pleasing to God. When you focus on size, it very quickly becomes sinful and arrogant.

You remember in the book of Revelation, Jesus himself writes to a church and he says, you have the name of being alive. You've got it all. But in fact, he says, you are dead. I'm not saying that God is not interested in numbers.

[4 : 58] He knows us all by name. And true growth, kingdom growth, though, you just can't measure and quantify in numbers. The second thing to say is, the church growth has now become a kind of spiritual technology.

If I pull these levers, A, B, C, the idea is that I will get result, X, Y, Z, out the other end. And what that does is, it puts me in the driving seat and it makes pragmatism the ruling principle.

I went to a seminar with Neil in the last 12 months where it wouldn't have made an iota of difference if you were a Buddhist, thinking about how to grow a big Buddhist thing, or a hockey fan, or a club for atheists.

The same pragmatic principles would work. I pointed that out to the organisers and they were delighted to hear that. The third thing, the most important thing, of course, is that it's God who grows the church.

We don't. And in Corinthians, as David began to read, in chapter 3, when Paul speaks about his apostolic ministry and the others, he says this, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

[6 : 17] If the apostle can't grow churches, I don't think we can. There's something vaguely blasphemous, I think, just about the whole concept of our growing churches. Just look for a moment before we come to chapter 11, back to chapter 8 in Acts, on page 119.

You know the early Christians had received the Holy Spirit and they began sharing their possessions with one another. And they were going about Jerusalem, doing good, preaching the name of Jesus, and a number of them had been arrested and beaten.

And do you remember chapter 7 is the longest sermon we get in the book of Acts. As Stephen stands up, he's been arrested and he preaches faithfully the Lord Jesus Christ. They take him outside, they won't let him finish his sermon, and they pelt him to death with rocks.

And then we read in verse 3, Saul was ravaging the church and entering house after house. He dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Terrible moment for the life of the early Christians.

But look at verse 4. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word, literally evangelizing the word, and Philip went down to Samaria. Stunning, isn't it?

[7 : 28] That even through the persecution, God uses that scattering to spread the gospel. It's not a church growth technique. And we come to chapter 11, verse 19, and we go back to that point.

We pick up the story eight years later, and the church is growing and the church is expanding, and in this chapter, in this section 19 to the end, there are three things God uses, three ways in which God grows the church.

These are not three church growth principles, but there are three elements that we see repeated here and elsewhere through the book of Acts in the way that God works, a threefold pattern.

I just want us to look at it this morning. And the first is that God grows the church by scattering. They're all counterintuitive. Verses 19 to 21, let me read a couple of these verses.

Now those who are scattered, and scattering is a seed word. Those who are scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen and travelled up as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews.

[8 : 40] But there were some, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch, this brilliant city, third biggest in the whole empire, spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

What happened was that Stephen's murder opened the floodgates and there was this release of tremendous hatred and persecution. And there seems to come a moment in the life of tribes and groups and large organisations where they throw off all the restraint and they do the worst they can, justifying it under the name of nationalism or expansion or freedom or religion.

And we should not be under any illusion these were terrible circumstances for these Christians. Their very lives were at risk. Their fundamental human rights had been stripped away and so they fled.

They scattered north, south, east and west. Families torn apart. People losing everything that they had. Standing up to Phoenicia and out to the islands and who knows where.

And the lovely, the remarkable thing is that as they go, these Christians are not silent. They don't pretend they're not Christians anymore. When they arrive in this new city, they don't hide the fact that they belong to Jesus Christ.

[10 : 01] Verse 20, they spoke the word. Literally, they evangelised the Lord Jesus Christ. And it's important for us to know that in a time of persecution, there can be a right time to move on.

The Bible never encourages masochism. But, even when we do, we are to be scattered like seed, speaking the gospel of Jesus to others.

Because as these Christians run away from persecution, their main concern is not their personal safety, but the spread of Christ's name. But, things are not as they seem.

There's something deeper here. And, verse 21 tells us what that deeper thing is. We read, and the hand of the Lord was with them. And a great number that believed, turned, were converted to the Lord.

Isn't that remarkable? Through the very difficulty and suffering and hardship, God does something they could not have hoped for and they could not have imagined. The seed of God's word is spread.

[11 : 11] Men and women become Christians. I point it to you, it's in suffering and hardship, it's through upheaval, it's through being scattered, that the name of Jesus goes over mountains and over oceans.

And it looked as though, when it looked as though wickedness was succeeding, God was using that very wickedness, the very, you know, the things that were wicked by those who hated God.

God uses those to spread his name. It's a great picture. And it's these nameless Christians, they're all anonymous, who are expelled from Jerusalem to spread the gospel.

If they had not been scattered, the gospel wouldn't have gone up the coast. It's almost as though God has to pick the church up in Jerusalem and tear it into shreds, to scatter it to create new churches.

Interesting, isn't it? Most of the church planting that happens in the book of Acts is not a deliberate and brilliant mission strategy from head office. It's the response of faithful Christians to difficulty and to evil by sharing the gospel.

[12 : 28] It is as Christians speak the word of God and remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ that God frustrates the plans of Satan and the church is scattered. That's how the church grows.

I've been to a lot of church growth conferences and I've never heard persecution mentioned once as a strategy. But you see, God scatters the church and the way it works is as he scatters, Christians look at their lives and they think to themselves, what's a first principle here?

What's ultimately a value? How can I use the time I have left in my life not to be safe and secure but to spread the great message of the Lord Jesus Christ? How does the church grow?

By scattering. Secondly, by gathering in verses 22 to 26. So, in verse 22, when the church in Jerusalem hears about what's going on in Antioch, what do they do?

They send the man with the biggest heart in the early church, Barnabas. He's exactly the right bloke. Look at verse 23, please. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad.

[13 : 46] He exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. He was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith. A large company was added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.

Don't you think the whole thing could have been ruined if Barnabas had been a church growth man? I should stop saying that. If he was personally ambitious, certainly it would have ruined things.

But nothing gives him greater joy than seeing people responding to the gospel and following Jesus literally with all their heart, says here.

What lies behind the fact that he's not driven by envy and ambition is he's full of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the fountain of this good work in him. And that's a mark. You know, you can tell that the Holy Spirit is at work in your heart if you want him to receive the credit and if you just love seeing the gospel progress.

Barnabas could have ruled the roost in Antioch. He could have written books and done some seminars but he does something very strange. He steps aside and he goes to Tarsus to get someone who is more gifted than he is.

[15 : 03] For one reason, it is because he wants the building up of the church and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. He places all his gifts and all his resources at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's got nothing to do with territory. It's got to do with him. I well remember the first time I worked in ministry with someone who was genuinely interested in gospel growth and not in his own territory.

It's a terrible thing. Preaching the gospel can become a very slippery way of advancing your own reputation. But this man, he just rejoiced in the success of other people.

He kept putting other people up secure in the knowledge of Christ's love. He was a big man. He played rugby for Australia and I would be preaching sometimes in the middle of a morning service like this and he'd be sitting where Neil was and he would call out Hallelujah in the middle of the sermon.

It was quite distracting but he was. So when Barnabas finds Saul, verse 26, he brings him to Antioch and for a whole year they gather with the children and taught a large company of people.

[16 : 23] In Antioch, the disciples for the first time called Christians. Entire year they gather. I take it they kept gathering and they stayed in one gathering for a year.

They gather and they teach God's word. This is how God nurtures and builds his people and we need to see how important the gathering is. Very difficult to grow if you are a part-time Christian.

No, you'll be offended by saying that. You only gather occasionally once or twice a month to hear God's word with other believers. It's almost impossible to reorder the affection of your heart toward Jesus Christ and to grow deep in repentance if you're just here once a month.

And I know I'm speaking to the wrong people because you're here but I'm saying it so that you might exhort your friends. Actually, part of me wonders whether I should say it at all because the motivation to gather with other Christians doesn't come by being told to.

It has to come out of our hearts. So let me move on very quickly. What did Barnabas and Saul teach? Well, the end of verse 23 we know that Barnabas exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

[17 : 42] This exhortation word is a very strong word. It's an urging word. And you would think, wouldn't you, that Barnabas in this rapidly growing church would pull back a bit on this urging business.

I mean, wouldn't you think he'd leave them alone? No, he appeals, he implores to them literally to remain true to Jesus with all their hearts. Because he knew, as the apostles know, that we need to be constantly reminded of the gospel.

That growth and maturity in the Christian life come through having the word of God thoroughly and regularly and deeply impressed in our hearts. Not just hearing it, but as the collect says, somehow taking it and inwardly digesting it.

Our minds are so slippery, aren't they? Our hearts create so many idols so quickly. And if we do not regularly hear and regularly digest the teaching of God's word, we will fall away.

Church grows as we gather and as we hear and respond to the voice of God. But I'm a little bit afraid that as evangelicals we can turn this into a formula as well.

[18 : 59] You know, gathering plus teaching of God's word equals church growth. We can manage that. But that's not really what's happening here. There's something deeper again. In verse 23, the beginning of that verse, we're told that the gathering and growth was God's doing because what Barnabas saw was the grace of God.

He saw the grace of God. And I think grace is one of the most important and most diluted and misused words in our vocabulary today, don't you think?

It's been hijacked. It's been tamed and domesticated and weakened so it doesn't challenge us anymore. Grace has become almost completely emptied of its God content and it now means something equivalent to nice, pleasant and kind.

That is not the New Testament view of grace. What Barnabas saw was not nice and kind. What he saw was people hearing the gospel, turning away from sins, giving themselves wholeheartedly to following Jesus Christ.

What he saw were people who were suffering terribly, who had been cast adrift from their families, remaining faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, evangelizing the Lord Jesus Christ despite their loss.

[20 : 24] And this is where we see the grace of God. It's when people continue in passionate obedience and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ despite desperately difficult circumstances.

That's where the grace of God is. It's when people make choices not based on cultural values but based on what will promote the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. I wish I could tell you some of the stories this week of people in this congregation who have made intentional and deliberate choice about what is best for the gospel despite what it cost them.

that's the grace of God. And I don't think it's any surprise that Antioch's the first place people are called Christians. Calvin has this lovely comment that I read during the week.

He said the church had been going in Jerusalem for a good decade and nobody had given them that nickname. But it shows in Antioch they're not Jews.

There's a different thing happening here that they are being called by those around them something that talks about their life and their purpose and their motivation what they talk about what they like to talk about what they share and how they live it's all directed by the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 46] And it's a very grave question for you and I to ask of ourselves here at St. John's if people were stretching for a new word to describe the spiritual dynamic amongst us what word would they choose?

Well growth comes through scattering growth comes through gathering and finally briefly growth comes by sending verses 27 to the end of the chapter in 11 very interesting Antioch faces a natural disaster prophets come from Jerusalem including Agabus who predicts a great famine and Luke adds a note there in verse 28 that that happened during the time when Claudius was emperor official Roman historian Suetonius tells us that during the famine the emperor I Claudius went out into the marketplace one day and people pelted him with dried crusts it was a crummy thing to do the emperor but the interest of Luke thank you the interest of Luke is not so much on the prophecy but the response verse 29 the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief that's a special word to the brethren who lived in Judea and they did so sending it to the elders by the hand of

Barnabas and Saul now notice they don't just take money out of general funds in Antioch this is a unique unexpected need and so they raise by special donations and they send Barnabas and they send Saul and that's the visit to Jerusalem that's recorded in Galatians 2 notice please everyone each of the disciples give according to their own ability literally according to how well off they are they give according to how much money they have in other words God gives wealth to some in the church so that you might have a ministry your wealth has not come to you because of your skill and brilliance it is a gift of God to you it's been committed to you by God so that you might use it for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ very instructive too they don't just give over to the nation of Judea they give they have a special care for those who are of the household of faith but again there is a deeper issue here there is something much more important do you remember those very good people who were here last week remember in chapter 10 that the gospel went across the boundary out of

Israel and to the Gentiles for the first time what is happening here is the Gentile Christians are now ministering to serving the Jewish Christians back there in Judea the word relief is the Christian word for ministry for serving as the Jerusalem church had sent Barnabas and Saul to Antioch now Antioch is in a position to send back to Jerusalem Barnabas and Saul with interest just hold your finger in chapter 11 for a moment and turn right to Romans 15 please Romans 15 verse 27 begins at the bottom of page 154 now Paul is speaking about another collection that he brought to Jerusalem to the

Christians in Jerusalem from Gentile believers and look what he says why they did it verse 27 they were pleased to do it and indeed they the Gentiles are in debt to them the Jews for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings isn't that great it completely shatters the donor receiver distinction it transforms the power of money instead of there being an inequality between donor and receiver now there is an equality a partnership in the gospel the Gentiles receive the gospel from Jerusalem they receive spiritual blessings and they are obligated therefore to share their material blessings it's the obligation of love it's the fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ if we receive the word we share all good things with those who teach us all that is sent so

[26 : 29] Paul and Barnabas are sent gift of money is sent and this too is how the church grows I want to finish very quickly with you with two things first has to do with who does what in church growth and I want to direct you back in chapter 11 to the last phrase in verse 24 a large company we read was added to the Lord you should know that that's a technical term in the book of Acts for how the church grows people come to faith in Jesus Christ they don't just join a voluntary organisation they don't just become members of the church they become added to the Lord it does demonstrate that God is interested in church growth and on the day of Pentecost we are told that the

Lord added those who are being saved so who does what the Lord adds to the Lord from beginning to end it is the work of God we can't manage it we can't manipulate it we can't pull some levers and control it God who gives growth yes through the faithfulness of his people God who adds to his church and I think it's so important for us to pray and to seek the Lord Jesus Christ with all our hearts and to call on God to do what God does trusting him and expecting him to do that secondly and finally there is a connection in this passage between glory giving and growing serious connection but there is one do you not think that the way to grow the church ought to be to try and accumulate things to accumulate people or to accumulate money or to accumulate resources the opposite happens here

God scatters gathers sends and in each of those three stages of church life the model of life we are shown from the believers is that Christians deliberately choose to give away their rights and freedoms as they are scattered these nameless Christians they don't hold on to their rights but they endanger themselves afresh by evangelizing the Lord Jesus Christ Barnabas gives away he doesn't insist on his right for prominence gives it away to Saul for the teaching of the gospel the entire kings are free to hold on to their money but they don't give it away for the sake of the gospel and their brothers and sisters give away what they have because of their deep heart concern for one thing the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ the glory of Christ causes them to give through which

God grows his church Amen and that gun God and water with