

Sermon on Acts 11:19-30 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

How do you build and grow a church? A question we have often asked... As a replanted church going on three and a half years, just under a year as Reservoir Church... we don't believe God is done with this body so we keep going.

Just last Sunday as I was praying on the drive here and I was asking the Lord this same question - How do we grow and build the church - what are you up to?! While I was praying I believe the Holy Spirit brought to mind the Grand Coulee Dam as a picture of building the church.

Do you know about Grand Coulee - living in the Northwest, I regret not making a trip to visit it... At capacity it is the largest power station in the United States. Standing 550 feet tall across the natural land formation - Grand Coulee - this dam powers much of the Northwest and certainly historically it energized expansion and the economy of the Northwest. It harnesses the power of the Columbia River and has created a 9,562,000 ft capacity reservoir (Franklin Delano Roosevelt Lake) that has a 125 sq. mile surface area. It brings irrigation to the arid side of Washington State, bringing life to rich soil for farming and wine making!

But that is Grand Coulee today... do you know what it took to build it? The ingenuity, sweat, blood and bodies, lots of bodies. The idea begin in the 1920's but construction wouldn't begin until 1933 when the nation was in a time of desperation. Thousands of men and women would labor to design, prepare the site and build the dam. Each worker played a pivotal role, from the young men working jackhammers on the side of the hill to engineers working to harness power from the river. Even the pop-up communities that served workers became a necessity to progress. Slow, steady progress and nearly a decade later, Grand Coulee was complete. But with concrete set and turbines ready to generate power and send irrigation to the south, they needed something beyond their control. They needed the Columbia to fill the reservoir and flow over the spillway of the dam...

What a picture this is of the church - how it is built and how it grows - and maybe even how it can be used for generations. Everyone with a role to play, work to be done and the need for something beyond us to make the magic happen!

What is true of the church is true of the Christian life...

The church is built by the power of God through the faithful partnership of His people.

Acts 11:19–30 “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. [20] 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. [21] And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. [22] The report of this

came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. [23] 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, [24] for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. [25] So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, [26] and when he had 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.

[27] Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. [28] 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). [29] So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. [30] And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” (ESV)

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It has been a wild ride to this point - expansion, really explosion of the church as a result of persecution - believers are sent out of Jerusalem to stay safe and they carry the message that transformed them to the corners of their world. Unstoppable, sharing of the good news of Jesus.

Amazing things are happening - miracles, visions, the welcome of outsiders into the family of God. But in reading the account of these event in Acts we have to be careful... if you are like me, when we read these things we can do so without a sense of time.

This is partly due to how Luke is writing, like any good narrative that flows from event to event. As the gospel comes to Antioch, this great city of antiquity, it has been more than a decade since Christ's ascension. Some of what seems to be rapid fire situations are spread out over time. This is good for us to recognize because our walks with Christ and each other in the church are long journeys in the same direction. We see some of this in key encouragement from Barnabas.

Over this time... the message of forgiveness of sin for all who believe in Jesus comes to Antioch. It is the third largest city in the Roman world after Rome and Alexandria. A Greek speaking, greek idol worshiping center of commerce in the east. God's light can shine in the darkest pit.

Hearing and clinging to the gospel, the church is formed here. Disciples are first called Christians here. And the missionary center of the church will shift to this great city. The metropolitan center for the expansion of the gospel to the Gentile world. The church in Antioch will be the Grand Coulee of the mission of the church global.

In this account of the church-in-Antioch's beginnings we find some clues to how the church is built and flourishes from a foundation of faithfulness. As we see how Antioch thrives - may we see ourselves as well.

These clues point to power, plodding, and partnership. Let's look at them together.

1) Power

The essential ingredient in the life of the church! Those scattered because of the persecution of the church went throughout the region mostly preaching to Jews - announcing the arrival of the Messiah and inauguration of his kingdom. But there were some, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, Greek speakers, that brought the message of hope to Hellenists... Gentiles. We have seen that the gospel is for all people and the founding of the church in Antioch is another great example of that.

But it was not the slick way these men spoke, or the show they put on in the city square. The church grows, people come to faith in Christ by the power of God.

22 "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord."

Our illustration of Grand Coulee Dam rightly flips a bit - it is not a great building effort then waiting on the power of the water... but the power that unleashes the building.

Normal chaps going about talking about what is most important to them, enthused by the hand of the Lord...

"Antioch was evangelized not by apostles but by the average members of Christ's body who were willing to share their faith. Wherever these fugitives landed, they kindled a blaze. Sharing Christ was to them as natural as tears to sorrow or a smile to happiness. Everyday believers empowered by the Holy Spirit of God blew away the hold of paganism on needy souls. What an example!"
Hughes

We can't miss this vital role of the power of God - the gospel, the power of God for salvation... it is more than information to be disseminated, or convincing to be done after lengthy debate. By his hand we believe.

Believing in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. That his perfect obedience, his substitutionary death and his victory over death was for you. That the life you now live is by faith in him, Jesus who loves you and gave himself for you. That belief, this faith is supernatural. Despite what you might think, it came by the power of God - the work of his Spirit to warm dead hearts making them alive.

In Antioch just like other places this power descends - a great number believes. It is not the numbers that prove the presence of this power but what these numbers do, what they live and die for.

We must distinguish a crowd from a church - both can be large but not necessarily formed by the work of Christ for the glory of Christ. The largest recorded worship service in the Bible occurred at the base of a mountain in a dance of idolatry and blasphemy around a golden calf... The church of Aaron at that point was a mega church, doing everything that God despised. Their activity caused church growth, but it was the wrong kind.

“If the hand of the Lord is on a Christian work, we have every right to expect it to grow and be effective; when the Lord’s hand is there, growth follows. However, we have to be careful because such growth does not prove that the hand of the Lord is there. We cannot have the hand of the Lord and not have growth, but we can have growth without the hand of the Lord.” Sproul

There is power, the hand of the Lord was with them, in Antioch. And it was noticed. Reports get to Jerusalem and the church there sends Barnabas, the encourager to confirm the work of the Spirit there.

And it is in his arrival and ministry we find our second clue to how a church is built and grows.

2) Plodding

23-24 “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, [24] for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.”

Barnabas, chosen probably because he was from Cyprus, able to communicate and maybe he knew the men that brought the gospel there. He arrives and was glad, the gospel has truly gone forth in power. But Barnabas doesn’t just vindicate the work and then move on. He remains and he encourages the church to faithfulness.

This movement is not a flash in the pan experience... like they get filled and then back to life as usual. This is transformation of all of life, that has lasting effect and it is by the same power they were saved that they are called to remain faithful, steadfast to Jesus.

Luke doesn’t write of major miracles here... like a cripple made to walk each week would maintain the growth of the church. But it is their steadfast purpose... their plodding that Barnabas inspires and the church takes on - “and a great many people were added to the Lord.” It is an element of the growth of the church.

This is the common exhortation of the church in the New Testament. Be steadfast - live for the long game, trusting, leaning into Jesus, into the power of the Holy Spirit.

Colossians 1:22–23 “he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, [23] if indeed you continue in

the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, ..” (ESV)

1 Corinthians 15:57–58 “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [58] Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (ESV)

Hebrews 6:19–20 “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, [20] where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf...” (ESV)

And here is the key to unlocking our steadfastness... by the steadfastness of Jesus we keep going. We don't approach remaining faithful to Jesus, trusting in him for life and eternity, as a way to earn those things. We live to be faithful because he has earned them for us.

Because he was steadfast when tempted in the wilderness, clinging to the word of God as his comfort and defense. Because he was steadfast in a garden before he was taken to be crucified. That the Father's will would be done... we have life.

Because he has the words of life, we stay put, clinging to his truth, to his power, to the hope we have in him... plodding. Steadfast in purpose of bringing him glory and sharing the good news of forgiveness of sin in him. Sharing the words of life we have believed.

Matthew 11:28–30 “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (ESV)

It is his steadfast love that defines us... that empowers us... that calls us to live. This is what Barnabas encouraged, this is what sets them apart, and what the Lord uses to bring more prodigals home to him. The faithful endurance of the believer, the faithful endurance of the church.

“Sustaining the everyday supernatural is about learning how to plod. It's about being open to what the Spirit might be saying to us, surrendered to his will and ready to step out. The great need of the church isn't for a few one-off risk takers, it's for risk-taking plodders.” *Everyday Supernatural*

The Christian life is the long game. The strategy of the church is the long game.

By the power of God, through the faithfulness of his people... as they partner together.

3) Partnership

This church described in Acts 11 is one of partnership. People and property used in community for the expansion of the church and the care of believers.

There is partnership in the sending of Barnabas from Jerusalem - that there would be unity in the global church. Rather than each local church left to itself there is a kingdom mentality established in their partnership.

There is partnership in ministry. Barnabas joins those already in Antioch in preaching and encouraging the saints. But then, for some reason, maybe as some speculate that he recognized the need for someone more gifted, Barnabas goes after Saul and brings him to the church at Antioch. Together they spend that first year teaching, living and plodding with believers there.

There is partnership in money - sharing provision with the church, with other believers. A prophecy comes of impending famine and a collection is taken for the church in Judea and Barnabas and Saul are sent to deliver it. Mercy ministry happening.

“That is what it means to be a Christian. It means to encourage. It means to reach out to the lost, and it means to give to relieve the pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters - locally, nationally, and internationally. That is how the connection was made between Antioch and Jerusalem, and it formed the foundation for the great missionary outreach of Paul and Barnabas.” Sproul

So the people that make up the church in Antioch are not just hanging around for the great teaching of Saul, they are not just plodding along as individuals... they are bought in, literally to the work of the ministry, together.

Partnership is not merely a necessity for those in Antioch... you could still thrive in the city with the right job... Partnership was a response to the grace they received in Christ. It was the fruit of the power of Jesus and the plodding faithfulness of the people.

I have had a few occasions recently to encourage people toward partnership in the church - and the phrase I keep using is “choose who you want to sin with, and get on with it.” And this is not a call to sin, but a recognition you are going to do it so live with those that will be quick to remind you of the gospel and spur you on to steadfastness. For the long haul.

This is what the church is meant for... this is what the Lord uses to grow the church.

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This is the formula! We might be creative in ways of doing it all, the experience of the power of God, the ways we plod and partner with one another. But at the core of a gospel-fueled, biblical church are these things.

So let's be about them!

Become part of the kingdom - believe in Jesus. *Kathie Lee Gifford this week reflecting on the death of Billy Graham, shared the gospel.* The only cure for the malignancy of the soul is Jesus. Recognize your rebellion against God, need for a Savior and run to him. His grace is free to you. Believe in him.

Church:

Pray for Power - Let's consistently petition the Lord to work in power among us, that his hand would be on us, not for our fame or glory but for the salvation of others. That those right now far from him would come home. That we would preach the gospel, share Jesus winsomely at every opportunity.

Keep going - Jesus has run the race on your behalf and secured your gold medal so you can keep running. Let his finished work lighten your step and give you joy in the journey... don't give up. Let his faithfulness form yours and be steadfast in purpose clinging to Jesus for all of life.

Partner - Pick the people you want to sin with! Get real, get into each other's lives. Do ministry together. Pool and prioritize your resources for the kingdom cause.

The church is built by the power of God through the faithful partnership of His people.

May the Lord build a Grand Coulee Dam among us... a reservoir of his grace and hope to irrigate the parched lands around us.