

The Many Marks of a Gospel-Formed Church (Part 2)

Introduction

The Text

- A. As I did the last time I was up here, I'm going to be bringing reflections out from all of [Acts 11](#) this morning, but, for the sake of time, I'll just read smaller section of it beginning in [v. 19](#).
- B. Before I read, though, let me briefly remind you where we are in the narrative here . . .
1. As we saw in [Acts 10](#), the gospel and the mission of the church is now expanding to include, not just Jews, but Gentiles—people like Cornelius; people who, though uncircumcised, and, therefore, not fully submitted to the ceremonial traditions of the Jewish people, nevertheless receive the Holy Spirit by grace through faith in Jesus.
 2. And Peter, in the opening verses of this chapter, as we've seen, is pushed to defend this expansion, as something ultimately, not from him, but from the Lord.
 3. And the Jewish Christians open their hearts to the idea. They recognize the gospel is bigger than them. And they glorify God for it.
 4. And then we read this . . .

¹⁹ 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. (Acts 11:19-30)

Part 2

- A. This is now Part 2 of what I have titled “[The Many Marks of a Gospel-Formed Church](#).” And I title it as such because I think what we have here in [Acts 11](#) (and all over the book of Acts, really) are these little windows into what a healthy church could and should look like. And I just wanted to bring out some things for you to see and consider with me now.

- B. Last time I gave you the first four of these marks and this time I hope to bring out another five.
1. So, in Part 1, we saw that the church should be marked by; (1) Hospitality; (2) Pursual; (3) Generosity; and (4) Joy.
 2. Now, in Part 2, I want you to see that the church should also be marked by: (5) Resilience; (6) Leadership; (7) Discipleship; (8) Holiness; and (9) Influence.
 - a. (Now, to be clear: By identifying “nine marks” here I am in no way intending to compete with Mark Dever’s [Nine Marks of a Healthy Church](#) if you’re familiar with his book and ministry. I’m not trying to be exhaustive in what I’m identifying. There are many more we could talk about. I’m just trying to bring out what I see in this chapter in particular.)

Mark #5: Resilience

- A. There is always great need for the church to have resilience because there is always steady opposition against it.
1. And this opposition comes at us both from within and from without—both from fellow Christians, self-proclaimed believers in the church; and from those outside the church in the unbelieving culture around.
- B. Now I bring up both aspects of this opposition, because both actually show up in this chapter . . .

Opposition from Within

- A. The former comes in the earlier verses that I skipped over. But now I’d like you to lift your gaze with me back up to [vv. 1-3](#) and consider them with me for a moment: “¹ Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’”
1. So let’s be clear: these are Jewish Christians taking issue with Peter’s intermingling with and accepting of non-Jew Gentile people.
 2. The translation there in [v. 2](#)—“the circumcision party”—is a bit misleading. In the original Greek it literally means “those of (or belonging to) the circumcision.”
 - a. In other words, while there could be some select group that Luke here has in mind, it could also simply be referring to “those who were Jews.”
- B. But the basic idea is that, in Jerusalem, there is clear opposition from Jewish Christians (which at this time would have been every Christian).
1. They didn’t like that Peter, in Jesus’ name, was welcoming in the Gentiles without making them first submit themselves to Jewish ordinance and ceremonial law—like circumcision or abstaining from unclean foods and things like this.

- a. And they “criticized him” for his application of the gospel in this way.
- C. It's a reminder to us, I think, that the gospel and those trying to hold to it will always be under fire—not just from those outside the church, where we might be more prone to expect it, but from those inside the church as well.
 - 1. This can often be the more challenging kind of opposition to decipher and push back against. It can also be the most painful because it's “friendly fire”—to be criticized by Christians as you try your best to minister the gospel of grace to others.
 - a. I can just tell you: As a pastor, this is probably the hardest part about the job. It's not the culture, at least here in America, that can hurt you quite so bad as your fellow Christians can. Because you'd like to expect better, you know.
- D. So Peter's forced to defend himself and his actions. And he does he so wonderfully there in the verses that follow.
 - 1. And all this reminds us: We're going to need resilience, if we're going to stay centered on the main things, centered on the gospel, if we're going to keep from getting crusty and distorted.
- E. And, of course, resilience, by definition is something that carries on long-term, it's something you need for the long haul.
 - 1. I wonder if you realize that, later, a similar kind of attack is going to come Peter's way. But, this time, instead of standing firm in defense of the free grace of God for us in Jesus, he buckles. Even Barnabas, whom we'll talk about in a little bit, buckles under the pressure.
 - a. So Paul says in Gal. 2: “¹¹ But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party [there they are again, these “of the circumcision” ones]. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.”
 - b. Paul says: “[T]heir conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel . . .” (v. 14). For “we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 16).
- F. Again, the point is: The fight is never over this side of heaven. You can't rest on yesterday's victory because the gospel is still under fire today.
 - 1. Every church and every Christian will every day have to put up a fight for the gospel—and that, not just as it applies to others, but also as it applies to yourself, right?
 - a. It takes a lot to believe it sometimes, doesn't it? It's not just the Gentiles out there who are welcome in Jesus, but me too—no matter what I did last night, there's forgiveness in him. I'm not saved on the basis of my own merit but on the basis of Christ's merit and his atoning death for me on that cross. Full stop.

- i. That's the battle. That's the fight. That's where we need resilience, even as we face opposition within.

Opposition from Without

- A. But, of course, there's opposition coming from outside the church as well. And that's what we see referenced there in [v. 19](#), where I started to read.
 1. Luke tells us that the early Christians who had all been gathered in and around Jerusalem in the beginning, were later "[scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen . . .](#)" And he tells us that as they fled this persecution, they ended up traveling "[as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch . . .](#)"
 2. They spread out. They left. As you and I would have likely done as well. But here's where resilience comes into play: What does Luke tell us they were doing as they went?
 - a. They "[\[spoke\] the word](#)"—at first just to Jews ([v. 19](#)), but then, there in Antioch, they began preaching the good news of Jesus to Gentiles as well ([v. 20](#)).
- B. And here's what I want you to catch:
 1. They didn't let the persecution get them down. They didn't let it cave them inward with self-concern or self-pity.
 2. No! Instead they let it propel them forward with love for others. They assumed God must have a new chapter to write, that's why he's moving us. They didn't distance themselves from Jesus or the gospel because it's caused them hardship, they went about preaching to anyone who would hear. They were resilient.
 - a. Stephen's death was a horrible thing, as was the persecution that followed.
 - b. But these horrible things could be taken up in the hands of a sovereign God and used to accomplish beautiful things in the gospel.
- C. You remember, in [Acts 1:8](#), Jesus gives his apostles their marching orders, when he says: "[\[Y\]ou will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.](#)"
 1. And I've told you: Here we have laid out for us the thesis of this entire book. We are going to watch the gospel expand through each of these boundary-lines. It starts in Jerusalem and then moves into Judea and Samaria, and now it's carrying on to the end of the earth.
 2. But I wonder if you noticed: What is it that gets the gospel out of Jerusalem? What is it that propels the church onward in this mission? Interestingly enough, it's persecution at every point. Luke is jealous to make this connection plain for us.
 - a. So back in [Acts 8](#) he shows how this persecution propelled them through that first boundary-line—from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria: "[1 And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria . . . 4 \[And\] those who were scattered](#)

went about preaching the word” (vv. 1, 4). Persecution → Propulsion → Proclamation!

- b. And then here in [Acts 11](#), it’s the same connection being made, only now we’re breaking through that final boundary-line and heading for “the end of the earth.” Persecution → Propulsion → Proclamation!

D. But the only way this works is if the church has resilience. We don’t bail when it gets hard. We know God’s up to good.

- 1. Just as Jesus hanging on the cross looked like the end for him and us when truly it was a new beginning, so too the cross we are called to bear is going to hurt and we’ll be tempted to think God’s abandoning us, but really he’s got even more for us if we’d stick on the gospel and let him have his way.

- a. As I’ve said often here: Trials are God’s taxicabs. They’re what he often uses to get his people where he wants them to go (cf. [Matt. 2:13-15](#)).

E. So how about you? What are you looking at and calling a roadblock when truly it’s a guardrail?

- 1. You think it’s the end of the road—like he’s putting a stop to all your hopes and dreams.
- 2. But really he’s just trying to get you to turn so he can take you somewhere even better.

- a. Whatever you’re dealing with today, stay with him, stay tethered to the gospel, stay resilient. He’s up to something good.

Mark #6: Leadership

A. A gospel-formed church is marked by leadership, and, of course, with this, I’m referring to “healthy” leadership.

B. But I point this out because I do think sometimes, because we’ve seen authority and leadership misused, even in the church, we tend to want to do away with the whole thing.

- 1. We become those sorts of Christians that think: “I can follow Jesus without the institution or the oversight. I don’t need some pastor/elder/manipulator getting in there and messing things up for me. I’ve been hurt by that before, I will not be hurt by it again.”

- a. So we “[throw the baby out with the bathwater](#),” as the saying goes.

C. Because, you see, leadership in the church is a good thing. And God doesn’t want to do away with it just because it has and can be abused. He wants to redeem it and reclaim it.

- 1. If you’ve been reading along with the Advent devotional we’ve been giving away this season, you’ve seen this recently in what God says about the bad shepherds there in Israel in [Ezek. 34](#). These guys are jacked up. Instead of feeding the sheep, they’re feeding on the sheep.

- a. But he doesn't say: "Therefore, we need to do away with all shepherds entirely."
- b. He says: "We need to bring in good shepherds. We need, first, to bring in the Good Shepherd (cf. [Micah 5:4](#)) and, then, he'll establish good undershepherds to serve beneath him" (cf. [Jer. 23:4](#); [1 Pet. 5:2](#)).

Acts 11

A. And that's precisely what we see happening here in [Acts 11](#). I think it comes out clearest there in the last verse.

- 1. Remember, Agabus comes and foretells a famine.
- 2. The church in Antioch wants to offer relief to some of the saints there in Jerusalem and Judea.
- 3. So they take up an offering, as it were, and then what? They "[send] it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul" (v. 30).

B. Notice two things . . .

- 1. First, the mention of "elders" here is particularly interesting, because, when referring to the church in Jerusalem, we would have expected instead the mention of the apostles.
 - a. That's what we saw in [Acts 4](#), if you recall. People would take their offering and lay it at the feet of the "apostles" (vv. 35, 37).
 - b. So why now are we reading about these "elders"?
 - i. Well, it seems to mark some sort of transition in who was handling the day-to-day affairs in the early church there in Jerusalem. There were leaders being raised up to shepherd and oversee and care for folks.
- 2. But the second thing I want you to notice is that these leaders were trustworthy.
 - a. The Christians in Antioch took their offering and entrusted it to their leaders, "Barnabas and Saul".
 - b. And Barnabas and Saul took it from there and entrusted it to the leaders in Jerusalem, the "elders". And these elders would then distribute what was given to those in the church who had need.
 - i. There was trust. Because these leaders, it would seem, had integrity. They weren't in it for themselves.
 - ii. They weren't feeding on the sheep, but instead were feeding them, even if that meant laying aside their own needs and concerns.

Gospel-Formed

A. And this, of course, is the mark a gospel-formed church, because it's really what you find at the heart of the gospel.

1. I told you God was going to establish Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Well, what does the Good Shepherd do? Hear it from his own mouth, [John 10:11](#): “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
 - a. Jesus does not lead from somewhere high above us. He leads from down low.
 - b. He doesn’t lord it over. He comes to serve.
 - c. And he doesn’t just come down to our level. That would be amazing enough. But he actually comes down and gets beneath us.
 - i. That’s why he’s in an animal’s feeding trough on Christmas night.
 - ii. That’s why he’s on his knees at the Last Supper washing feet.
 - iii. That’s why he’s hung on that cross in our place.

(1) He puts himself in the dirt, so he can put us in the sky!

B. And any leadership in the church that bears his name ought to have that same kind of flavor to it.

1. So Peter exhorts his fellow elders in [1 Pet. 5](#): “² [S]hepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁵ . . . Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility . . .” (vv. 2-3, 5). That’s gospel-formed leadership.

What about Us?

A. So let me ask you:

1. If you want to be a leader in this church, why do you want it?
 - a. Are you hoping simply to serve and give your life for others as Jesus has for you?
 - b. Or are you secretly hoping to get something for yourself in it?
2. If you’re already a leader in this church, why are you doing it?
 - a. I love the leaders in this church. I think we have healthy leadership here.
 - b. But I’m aware—painfully and personally aware—just how easy it is for this self-centered stuff to creep in.
 - i. And before you know it, even as it looks like you’re feeding the sheep, truly in your heart you’re feeding on them. You’re cooking up some lambchops. You’re making a nice wool sweater to put around yourself. “I hope people notice me. I hope people praise me. Wasn’t that a good sermon I preached? Wasn’t that a good song I sang? Wasn’t that a good study I led?”
 - (1) Beware the drift that can happen beneath the surface. It still looks like you’re doing the same old ministry, but your heart’s in it for something else.
 - (2) Instead, let your leadership be formed by the gospel!

Mark #7: Discipleship

Acts 11

- A. I wonder if you noticed. As there's this swelling movement happening in Antioch, with people coming to Jesus from all different walks of life, it's not as if the missionaries or the leaders there suddenly say: "Well, if they've been reached for Jesus now, I guess we'll move right along. Our job here is done."
1. No! Barnabas, when he's sent from Jerusalem to come check it out, when he sees the growth and all this, what does he do?
 - a. He sends for Paul. "I need help."
- B. And then together what do they do? Look at the end of v. 26: "For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people."
1. They didn't just blitz out of there. They set up camp and stayed a while. The Christian mission isn't just to reach and then release, it's to reach and then teach.
 - a. So there's discipleship happening in the church. People are not just coming to faith, they're growing in it.
- C. And I think we get a little picture of what this discipleship might have entailed when we consider what Barnabas is doing there in v. 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 . . ."
1. It's this word "exhorted" here that I'm particularly interested in. In the original Greek, it's the word *parakaleō*.
 - a. Perhaps you've heard of it. It's notoriously challenging to translate because the semantic range is so large.
 - b. It can mean: to comfort, encourage, or cheer up; to exhort, urge, or call; to ask, beg, or plead.
- D. You get a sense of all the stuff that's in the mix here. But, really, it comes out quite nicely when you break the word into its two constituent parts:
1. "Para" means to come alongside, to be with. There's a tenderness to it. We use this in English for words like "paramedic." They come alongside you in your need and help you!
 2. "Kaleō" means to call or summon. There's a strength to it. You're telling people what is true and what they must do.

- a. Put them back together and here's what you have: To **parakaleō** is to come alongside and to call out. It's to be tender with a person even as you tell them the hard truth about things, about themselves.
 - i. It's incarnational, you move into their story, you feel what they feel, you love them.
 - ii. But it's also instructional, you point them to something better.

(1) You don't just coddle, you correct where necessary.

E. This word is getting at that marriage elsewhere referred to in the Bible between love, on the one hand, and truth, on the other.

- 1. **Para** accents love, **kaleō** accents truth, but both come together in Christian ministry and discipleship.
 - a. If all I do is love you, comfort you, encourage you, but I don't have the courage to call you out for sin or when you're in dangerous spiritual territory, I don't really love you. I love myself and I'm worried you won't like me if I share a hard word with you.
 - i. In the Christian economy, love always comes packaged with truth.
 - b. And if I'm quick to tell you the truth and call you out and exhort and critique, but I don't have the patience to really enter your story and listen to you, if I don't offer the hope of the gospel as I share the truth with you, I'm not really sharing the truth with you am I. Because the truth is full of hope and possibility in Jesus.
 - i. In the Christian economy, truth always comes packaged with love.

F. So this is what Barnabas and Paul are doing as they're teaching the disciples here.

- 1. They're getting into the hearts and lives of these people.
 - a. They're loving them and comforting them and encouraging them in the grace of God.
 - b. But they're also calling them out and sharing the harder truths that will help them grow in the faith.

Gospel-Formed

A. And a gospel-formed church should have this going on, because, again, this is what the gospel is all about.

- 1. That's what we celebrate at Christmastime, right? Jesus steps into our story. He comes alongside. He walks with us. He comforts us. But he also calls us out and corrects us.
 - a. The gospel tells me I am so loved that Jesus would choose to come and die for me.
 - b. But it also tells me I am so sinful that Jesus had to come and die for me.

- i. I get both love and truth, comfort and call, in the same package we call the gospel.

B. And that's why the two must stay together in our gospel-formed discipleship.

What about Us?

A. So let me ask you, are you engaged in this?

1. Are you discipling and involved in loving and sharing truth with others?
2. But, beyond that, on the flip side, are you yourself seeking that out from people in the church? Because this is how you grow. This is what you need: **Parakaleō**.

B. I love that text in **Heb. 10**, where the author writes this: “²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering . . . ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (vv. 23-25).

1. I wonder if you realize: that word there translated “**encouraging**”, do you want to know what it is? **Parakaleō**.

C. So here's what he's saying:

1. Do you want to “**hold fast**” your confession of faith?
2. Do you want to be “**stir[red]**” up towards love and good works?
3. Do you want to make it to the last “**Day**”?
4. Or, in the words of **Acts 11**, you want to “**remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose**” (v. 23)?
 - a. Then you need **parakaleō**—from you to others, and from others to you.
 - b. And, of course, the only way you can effectively share love and truth with one another is if you're “**not neglecting to meet together**” as he says.

D. And he's not just taking about meeting on Sundays, although that's a start. He's talking about meeting up day-by-day.

1. And this makes sense so far as **parakaleō** ministry is concerned. That's harder to do effectively in a larger gathering, because you really need to get into the details of each other's lives.
2. So one of the most important places in our church where **parakaleō** ministry happens is actually in the Home Groups that meet throughout the week. That's where you can truly be known and loved and called out and all these things. That's where the Christian life really gains traction in the everyday.
 - a. That's why, when it comes to small groups, our goal is to have everyone in one. So are you? Talk to me after. I can help you get plugged in.

E. A gospel-formed church is marked by discipleship.

Mark #8: Holiness

“Christian”

A. I’ll be quick on these last two. But by “Holiness” I’m simply referring to the fact that it becomes clear that something different is going on with these Christians here.

1. They’re in the world but they’re not of it. They’re something separate, set apart, holy.

B. I’m getting this from the fascinating little development Luke highlights there at the end of [v. 26](#) or our text, when he writes: “[And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.](#)”

1. The word Christian here simply means: “[one who is associated with Christ](#)” (BDAG); “[a follower of Christ](#)” (Mounce); “[one who belongs to Christ](#)”; as one commentator puts it: it means these are “[Christ-people](#)” (TNTC).

C. And they’re first called such a thing there in Antioch, I think, because this is the first time it becomes abundantly plain to those outside:

1. We’re not talking about some divergent sect of Judaism anymore.

2. We’re talking about something else entirely.

a. They’re not Jewish. They’re not Roman. They’re Jesus-people.

b. Their lives have been so formed by the gospel that they don’t look like anyone else . . . save Christ!

i. Hence, they were called “[Christian.](#)” Isn’t that beautiful?!

D. But, I wonder, for you: Are you so marked by Christ, that whatever else you are—American or immigrant; white or black; Republican or Democrat; white-collar or blue-collar; rich or poor; man or woman—underneath it all the thing that most defines you is that you’re a “Christian” . . . you’re a “Christ-person”?

1. He changes the way you hold your citizenship or your ethnicity or your race or your politics or your social status or your gender (cf. [Gal. 3:28](#)).

a. You’re in the world, but you’re not of it. You’re something new, something different, something holy.

E. Can that be said of you? Can that be said of us?

1. Because a gospel-formed church is marked by holiness.

Mark #9: Influence

- A. And the last thing I would point out is that when the church operates in accordance with each of the previous eight marks we've looked at—(1) Hospitality; (2) Pursual; (3) Generosity; (4) Joy; (5) Resilience; (6) Leadership; (7) Discipleship; (8) Holiness—it's going to attract and influence the culture around it. Of course it will!
- B. And that's what we see here. Twice Luke draws attention to the fact that the church, as it's operating in this way, it's growing.
 - 1. So v. 21: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord."
 - 2. And then again in v. 24: "And a great many people were added to the Lord."
- C. So if we want to be a church that powerfully influences the culture around us for Jesus, I think we have to give a good hard look at the preceding eight marks and prayerfully and honestly evaluate where we're strong and where we're weak and how we can grow in these things collectively as a church and individually as followers of Jesus.
 - 1. He's here to help. Don't forget all of this marks a "gospel-formed" church.
 - a. So the first step isn't to just try harder or be better.
 - b. It's to get back to and go deeper in the gospel, repent of where we're not truly believing it and re-root ourselves there.
 - i. We do that and everything else will follow!