

# How the Gospel forms a Multicultural Missional Church

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[0:00] Father God, as we have just sung, there is no one who is holy, there is no one who is like you. Help us to slow down in this time on Sunday morning here in this venue.

Help by the power of your spirit to clear our minds of all of the things that have been happening in the week, all of the things that are coming up next week as well.

Help us to just be present in this moment, to hear what you have to say to us. May I share faithfully and correctly, but may your spirit be at work revealing what you would have to show to us.

For the praise and glory of your name. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Betty, why don't you read for us? Thanks. Today's scripture reading is taken from Acts chapter 11 verses 1 to 30.

Please follow along your Bible. If you don't have a Bible, please do still grab them from the front of the stage or at the back near the door. Our passage is on page 865. Hear then God's word to us today.

[1:14] Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision parties criticized him saying, You went to the uncircumcised men and ate with them.

But Peter began and explained it to them in order. I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners.

And it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, Rise, Peter, kill and eat.

But I said, By no means, Lord, for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth. But the voice answered a second time from heaven, What God has made clean do not call common.

This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment, three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea.

[2:19] And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter.

He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning.

And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

When they heard these things, they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life. 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.

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

[3:40] The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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.

For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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. Now in these days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them called 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. So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Let us believe and respond to God's true and living word. Thanks, Betty. Just a quick note before I start.

[4:53] That was a long passage. There's a lot of detail in there. I'm only speaking for 30 minutes, so for sure I'm not going to cover every single question you might have. I'm going to be outside at the welcome table after the service.

So if you do have any questions that I don't cover, just write them down. Come and talk to me after the service. Don't let it distract you from the rest of the sermon. So every now and then in our lives, I think there are things that can happen that we previously thought wouldn't or couldn't happen, but that do happen.

And now they seem very possible moving forward. Maybe it's something small in your personal life. I sometimes have this experience where there's someone who I think I probably won't get along with, but then I meet them and I realize, wow, they're great and we get along really well.

Yeah. No comment. And then in the world of sports, for example, I'm often interested in people breaking the physical barriers of what we previously thought possible and how that changes people's perceptions moving forward.

I'm not one of those people who breaks those barriers, but these two pictures up on the screen show two such moments. Andy Bolton on the right, your left, was the first man to ever deadlift 1,000 pounds, or 453.5 kilos back in 2006.

[6:23] Slightly less than five times my body weight. I'll let you guys do the math. Simon Bannister, the other picture, was the first man to run a four-minute, a sub-four-minute mile back in 1954.

These events opened the door past what was previously thought impossible. Since then, over 40 people have deadlifted over 1,000 pounds, and over 1,500 people have run a mile faster than four minutes.

So these things are more possible than what we previously thought. Sometimes these kind of events are much bigger and impact the entire world moving forward. Take our experience of COVID, for example, or the development of AI.

Our lives are never going to be the same again. And today, in Acts 11, we are looking at a passage that supersedes even all of those events by a country mile.

We see a powerful and loving God impacting the very course of history, breaking down the physical and spiritual barriers between His traditional people and the whole world.

[7:32] What did that mean for the people back then? And whether you're Christian or not this morning, what does that mean for us today? I wouldn't usually do this, but in the middle of a book sermon series, I know we're kind of halfway through Acts, but given the big transition that we're going to see in the chapter now, I think it's worthwhile taking a step back and understanding the story up until this point and where we are and where we're heading.

Right at the start of Acts, in chapter 1, after Jesus died, was resurrected, and spent some time with His disciples, He went up to heaven.

And His last words to His disciples, just before He went up to heaven, we see in verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in

Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

At a high level, the book of Acts can be split up into those three main sections that show how that command played out in reality over the next generation or so. In chapters 1 to 7, we read about the witness of Jesus spreading in Jerusalem.

In chapters 1 to 8, sorry, in chapters 8 to kind of 11 slash 12, we read about the witness of Jesus spreading a little bit further, but still within the traditional Holy Lands of Judea and Samaria.

[9:09] Then in chapters 13 to 28, for the rest of the book, we read about the witness of Jesus exploding even further away from these traditional Jewish areas and to the Gentiles, to the end of the earth.

Just in case you were wondering, the word Gentile essentially just means a person of non-Jewish heritage. So probably most of us here today, I would imagine, if not all.

And you know the author of Acts, Luke? He is coincidentally actually the only Gentile writer of any book in the Bible. So I think it's no coincidence that he wrote the events that we're reading about today.

It may be... So chapter 11, that kind of arrow pointing up at the bottom of the screen there, it puts us right in the middle of this transition, where we were originally focusing on the ministry of Peter, who was the head of the early church, to the Jewish people, over to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, and his ministry to the Gentiles and to the end of the earth.

It may be easy to gloss over these small details, but these are actually gigantic moments in human church history and the history of the world. This is an inflection point where what was originally thought not possible was made possible.

[10:32] Gentiles, us, are brought into the people... are brought in as the people of God through Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. So now that's helped to contextualize things a little bit, let's actually get into the passage.

And we'll spend time in two sections. There's essentially two stories here. Verses 1 to 18 and then verses 19 to 30. So we'll look at both of those today. Verses 1 to 18 are essentially just a summary, a summarized version of events of what Kevin preached on last week, which was the whole of chapter 10.

We've heard and read earlier that Luke is very careful about what he includes in his writings. So why the repetition here?

We don't see that much from Luke. Why now and why this particular story? It should actually make us sit up and take notice. Well, it goes back to what we were talking about earlier.

To a good Jew, this story would have been absolutely unprecedented, absolutely shocking. Peter the Jew and Cornelius the Roman soldier.

[11:42] For the first time maybe ever, for the first time maybe ever, a devout Jewish man of some significance and a Roman soldier, a leader in the occupying force, no less, stay with each other.

Sorry, Peter comes to stay with Cornelius and eat with him. For the Jewish people, when Peter goes back to Jerusalem, when they hear about it, they're understandably upset.

They criticize him. So in verse 2, the circumcision party, so that's just the Jewish people at the time. In verse 3, they say, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Essentially, Peter, come on, you should know better than that. We've been God's people for hundreds of years. We've got rules and regulations. We're the holy people of God, clean, set apart, just as God is holy, clean, and set apart.

We've got all these rules and regulations from Scripture, no less. This is what, this is the way God wants it, to show us how to maintain that separation. What are you doing eating with them?

[12:52] You've defiled yourself, tainted yourself, contaminated yourself. You see, the Jewish community was generally okay with non-Jews reading and accepting the Scripture, acknowledging God for who He was, perhaps even converting to Judaism.

That wasn't the issue. The issue was the jump to say that Gentiles were now equal in status with God. As He set apart people, and therefore, it was okay to eat with them.

The issue was actually how it impacted their lives, what it actually meant for their identity and their lives moving forward. But here in this story, we see no ceremonial cleansing rituals, no conversion

of Cornelius to become Jewish, as we would have expected.

These religious, racial, cultural barriers have all come crashing down. For centuries earlier, having kept them apart. Even more significant than that, the spiritual barriers have come down too.

The passage ends with Peter sharing the Gospel to Cornelius and his household, seeing the Holy Spirit descending on his household, and realizing, not easily, mind you, it says God had to repeat this thing three times to Peter before he got the point, that the Gospel is for all people.

[14:12] Everyone was welcome into the community of God. What was not thought possible just a few days back, for hundreds of years before that, was now playing out in real life before their very eyes.

And this was initially too much for the Jews. They criticized them. But, just a few verses later, in spite of their initial protests, something astonishing happens.

In verse 18, we read, if you look at your Bibles, in verse 18, it says, How and why this dramatic turnaround in such a short period of time?

Well, partly, it was because Peter took eyewitnesses with him and he was actually there and those eyewitnesses were brothers. Partly, it was because Peter was a leader of the church.

He was well respected. His words would have carried weight for sure. But really, it was the work, the undeniable work, of the Holy Spirit, as we read in verse 15.

[15:25] In verse 15, it says, As I began to speak, this is Peter saying, As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as on us at the beginning. That's the first verse at the top of the screen.

Peter is actually taken back in that moment to the day of Pentecost. In the upper room in Acts chapter 2 with Jesus' Jewish disciples where the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples and themselves.

So that's the second verse there on the slide. And then even further back, he's also reminded of John the Baptist's words in Matthew 3. That's what he repeats in his account.

To Peter, the decisive mark of God's people was God giving the gift of the Holy Spirit to them. And Peter was directly comparing his experiences with the Jews in that upper room on Pentecost with Cornelius and his household, this Roman Gentile soldier in this house in Caesarea.

And he sees no difference. He sees no difference. There's no difference in his experience. So who is he to stand in God's way? You see, Luke here has repeated this story because it's so huge.

[16:43] He's doing what he can to make it crystal clear for everyone that the gospel is for all. The gospel is for all. It's quite an easy thing to say.

We say it all the time at church. It becomes very familiar, especially if you've been a Christian for a long time. You know, it's quite basic, right? But the gospel is powerful and amazing, guys.

It's amazing. As we've just read here, to those who hear it for the first time, it can literally change their life as it changed the life of Cornelius and his household.

Think back to the first time you believed or you really understood the beauty of Jesus. I think of moments in my life that are once-in-a-lifetime moments that just show me the amazingness of God and the world.

I think of holding my daughter Isla, my oldest daughter, for the first ever time in my arm, on my arm. It wasn't even in my arm. She was premature. She was tiny. She just fit on my forearm there.

[17:43] I thought, wow, this is amazing. The gospel is infinitely more amazing than that, guys. For us today, it can also be easy to look down at those Jewish people and point the finger at how judgmental they were.

But the Jewish people had actually been conditioned to think that way for hundreds of years. And if we're honest, it kind of serves as an example and points a mirror into our own hearts.

Think of one person in your life right now that you think could never become a Christian for whatever reason. It could be religious, it could be political, it could be family, whatever reason it is. Have we lost sight of the power of the gospel to change their lives? What is stopping us from believing that they can come to faith? Are we willing to share the gospel with that person at cost to ourselves or continue to keep sharing the gospel with that person at cost to ourselves?

These questions are not meant to condemn us. Let me be clear about that. The tone of this passage is actually an encouraging one. It's a celebration. It's an encouraging passage. We can take heart from the fact that God has broken down all barriers that could ever keep us from Him.

[19:02] But it's through Jesus and by the work of the Holy Spirit. Which brings us to the second story, the Gentile church in verses 19 to 30.

Verse 19 we read, Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. So what does it look like when someone is radically changed?

The persecution of Stephen, firstly. What was that? Well if we go back to Acts, that's in Acts as well, chapter 7 and 8. Sorry, there's a lot of words there. Let me just say it, give you a high level summary.

So there was a guy called Stephen. He was one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and because of his ministry he would go around preaching about Jesus.

He was arrested and he was brought before the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. They were accusing him of blasphemy. So essentially saying offensive things about God which was a huge deal back then.

[20:06] While Stephen gets up and instead of giving a defense, he goes on the attack again. He makes another speech again about Jesus being God and salvation being found in Jesus alone.

And he then accuses the Jewish authorities of killing Jesus and therefore killing God. This is so offensive to the authorities that they stone Stephen to death.

Not only that, they persecute the remaining Jewish believers in Jerusalem to the point where they get scattered out of Jerusalem and into the surrounding regions.

Guess who was there front and center? That's the second highlighted verse there. No, it's not. Yeah, Saul was there. It's there somewhere. Guess who was there front and center?

Saul, who was the same Paul in this story. One of the places they scattered to was the city of Antioch. Not in Jerusalem, not in Judea or Samaria, but all the way outside in Antioch, in Syria.

[21:11] You see, Luke has started to highlight this shifting context that the gospel is starting to move outside its traditional and historical boundaries. Antioch was a powerhouse city.

So Antioch's on the top right circle there and they were down in Jerusalem, but they're scattered up to Antioch. Antioch was a powerhouse city, actually. It was referred to as the third city of the Roman Empire at that time.

That just meant that it was the third largest city behind Alexandria and Rome itself. It was a strategic economic powerhouse of trade and commerce.

It was multiracial. It was multilingual. It was multinational. It was cosmopolitan. People would come from far and wide to make their fame and make their fortune in Antioch.

Sound familiar? Like any place we might be living in right now? Well, as we'll see in the coming chapters, Antioch becomes the first venue for the international church.

[22:09] And it's the springboard for the worldwide Christian mission. So what was that church like in those very early days? Given the parallels between Antioch and us, sorry, Antioch and the Gentiles there, to Hong Kong and us here today, I just want to look at a couple, we could look at a lot of things, but I just want to highlight a couple that would have been clear to the church back then and therefore relevant and important to us in our context.

Two things. The first one is how the church engaged in everyday evangelism, which actually led to the changing of lives and the movement of the gospel, and how they responded in generosity that was radical and transcended traditional boundaries.

In verse 21, we see, so we'll look at the first section, everyday evangelism. In verse 21, we see, we read, and the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. I don't know if you guys remember a couple of weeks ago when Henry was preaching and we were looking at Saul's life immediately after he became a Christian. Henry mentioned, and how his life had changed.

Henry mentioned that Saul and Christians as well experience a change in their belief, their belonging, and their behavior. You see, these people who were saved in verse 21 both believed and then they turned to the Lord, so their behavior changed.

[23:45] The core of their worldview had changed, and that necessarily resulted in a visible and obvious change, turning to the Lord. In verse 26, we actually read that this is the first time ever that people who believe in Jesus are called Christians.

Christians. Now, there's some debate as to whether this was actually a positive term of endearment or a negative term of ridicule for those early Christians, but the point is that their turning to the Lord was so distinct, unique, full of Jesus that it was obvious to the outside observer.

We also see the church itself was not started by the leaders. It wasn't a church plant as such where a leader is chosen to go and start a church, but by ordinary Jewish men and women faithfully sharing the gospel.

Look at verse 20. It says, but there were some of them, these are some of the people who were scattered from Jerusalem, men of Cyprus and Cyrene who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists, the Hellenists are the Greek-speaking Gentiles who lived in Antioch, preaching the Lord Jesus.

I just want to pause here a minute. It's very easy to gloss over that verse, but think about these men and women. If you really think about it, they were refugees. They were fleeing persecution.

[25:12] They've just seen one of their leaders brutally stoned to death and they're fleeing persecution from the authorities. Most of their neighbors, it says, were scared to share the gospel and yet, here we see a small group of them still doing it.

Why did they keep sharing the gospel? How did they do it? What was their secret? Who were they? What were their names? I mean, they literally started the first international church.

This is literally how we're here this morning, right? But of course, we don't know. That's not the point. I think sometimes we here today can fall into a trap, whether consciously or not, that the human aspect of evangelism is only the work of the pastors, the leaders, the people up the front. We do believe that God can change lives. It's not that we don't believe that. but actually, sharing our faith, planting those seeds ourselves is a step too far.

Surely someone more appropriate needs to do that. We just need to get people to church so they can hear the right sermon. We just need to sign people up for the right alpha course so they can hear the alpha course material.

[26:28] We just need to introduce them to the right leader so they can have the right conversation with them. I wonder why. That's not what we see here in the scripture today, right?

It is indeed hard to find the time in busy Hong Kong today. Maybe there's a fear of what other people will think. It can be intimidating for sure. But is part of it that we are taking on the responsibility of saving people ourselves?

We feel the need to find the exact right words, the exact right argument. sophistication in our engagement with people. Well, God here both gives us an example that evangelism is for all of us to be engaging with, for all members of the church, but also that it's not up to us to save people. He's the one who is doing the hard work. Verse 21 says, The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. God is the one who saves.

He is the one doing this amazing work. He will take your weak, muddled, clumsy words, and He will grant salvation to someone who's far away from Him.

[27:41] Now, of course, this all above assumes that we have someone to share the gospel with in the first place. Most of us probably do have friends who are not Christians.

We should be spending more time with these people. We should be getting to know them. We should be rearranging our lives so that we can engage with them more. Getting to know them, praying for them, sharing our lives with them, introducing them to our other friends who are Christian.

Let me share with you an example. Now, I know she's going to be embarrassed by this, but I ran it by her before I'm sharing. Let me share with you another example of someone who I think is particularly good at this, my wife, Soda.

One thing that used to really bother me about Soda when we first met, only one, I'm just kidding, was a tendency, especially when we first met, it was a tendency to randomly spot people or

someone in a moving crowd and strike up a conversation with them.

She often isn't even sure she knows the person. They just look familiar. We'd be walking inside Causeway, like a busy Causeway, like literally walking in Causeway Bay on a weekend in the MTR, and suddenly she would stop and say, and point, and I think I know that person.

[29:09] Well, then we'd have to make our way through the crowd over to this person, or if they're going in the opposite direction, we'd kind of stop and have this awkward moment where we had to find a space to not get in the way of people.

And bump them. And then we'd spend the next minute awkwardly trying to find out who this person was, and now Soda may or may not know who they were. Do I know you? You look familiar.

Have I seen you before? I mean, the introverted side of me is still getting nervous as I'm sharing this. And you know, after all these years, I only just properly asked her why she does that as I was preparing for this sermon and thinking about it.

Well, to Soda, it's about looking for opportunities to see people and share the gospel. She is often scanning, observing, looking for people, looking at people.

She often invites those people to church or texts them afterwards to catch up. She actually asks herself, she dreams about what it would look like if this person believed in Jesus.

[30:15] She prays for them. Now, I'm not saying we all need to go out and hold up the MTR line, but for some of us, maybe we do, right? The point is the heart behind it.

How many of us do this? Actually look at people, look for people, think about their salvation, pray for their salvation. Ordinary people doing what they can to share the gospel.

It's going to look different for all of us. Just like those nameless men and women who will never know what their names were from Cyprus and Cyrene in Antioch. Something to think about.

The second aspect of the church that I want to share about is this generosity that transcended boundaries. You see, the other thing we see about the church is this seemingly random section at the end of the chapter, verses 21 to 30.

I think it's no coincidence that this came up during the love offering month, actually. But if we look at verses 27 to 30, what we see here is another never seen before event in human history.

[31:28] Basically, there was this prophet Agabus who came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and Agabus shared that there was going to be a big famine sometime in the future in the Jerusalem area.

Agabus shared and it's not clear if there were any motivations or expectations or actual ask behind this sharing from Agabus, other than to pass on a God-given message.

There is no direction from Paul or Barnabas, who were the leaders there at the time either, to give. There is not even a timeline. There's no severity provided to them as to how bad the famine is going to be, when it's going to happen, how long it's going to happen for, just that something is coming up. And how do the Gentiles respond? They give. They give according to what they can afford. This is huge. If previously at Cornelius' house, a Jew eating with a Gentile was too much, now we have Gentiles saved and transformed by the gospel, previously shunned for hundreds of years, voluntarily sending monetary relief back to the Jewish communities in needs.

This is radical. Martin Luther once famously said in one of his sermons, there are three conversions necessary, the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind, and the conversion of the wallet.

[32:59] I think this is an especially apt quote for the church in Antioch and us here in Hong Kong, the church today. We can give ourselves in many ways, our time, our skills, our intelligence.

We absolutely should, that's wonderful, but oftentimes parting with our money can feel a step too far. Again, the point of the passage here is not to condemn us and make us feel bad.

This is an encouraging and a celebratory piece of scripture. But the fact is that one of the marks of the church in Antioch, that they had received the gospel, been empowered by the Holy Spirit, was this radical, unexpected, and generous giving.

The early church shows us what this can look like, and it should cause us to think what it can look like for us today. Let's come into Lent.

I gave some examples at the start of events that shift our understanding of what is possible moving forward. We've seen in Acts 11 here another such event or events that were never seen before, that

impacted the course of history moving forward.

[34:10] In fact, that's why we are able to stand here today and worship God in the first place. Gentiles, the people of God from all backgrounds and races, a motley crew, if you ask me, worshipping God together.

How do we respond to this? Well, if you're a Christian today, just as it impacted the church back then, let these events similarly change us. Spur us on to share the good news and give generously to those in need.

If you're not a Christian today, I don't know what stage of your spiritual journey you're at. God does. But I want you to know, as an ordinary man up here on the stage, with a very simple, ordinary message, I want you to know that Jesus loves you so much that he died for you.

And he is asking you to respond to that by believing in his name, so that you can find true life and relationship with God.

He is powerful enough, and we've seen that in the chapter today, to break down whatever barriers are in your way. And he cares enough to change your life.

[35:33] life. So I invite you to respond to this invitation. If you're not a Christian, believe, turn to Jesus today. I'm very happy to speak to you about it after the service.

Let me pray for us as we finish. Father God, thank you for your son Jesus.

Thank you for the Holy Spirit. These very simple truths that were the way that you grew your church back then is the way that you grow your church now.

Help us to not grow complacent at the familiarity of the gospel in our lives, but to see it for the amazing, life-changing, transformative thing that it is.

May we be encouraged to share it with others, to give generously to those in need, for the praise and the glory of your name, so that many people would come to know and say that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[36:37] In his name I pray. Amen. Amen.