



## **Unified Church – Part 2**

### **Distinctions, Diversity & Devotion**

**Pastor Mike Fabarez**

Well, I wonder what you would say if I were to ask you how important is it for you to have a good, solid, strong, vibrant church? I just wonder what you would say if I asked you how important is that? I think no matter what you thought of I can safely assert that it is probably far more important than you think it is. I've had the unique advantage in my role over the decades to be able to see Christian's lives and to watch how they function and what happens to them. I've heard countless stories of Christians who have never had a strong and vibrant church. I've heard stories of Christians who have always had a strong and vibrant church, and I've heard of Christians who have had a strong and vibrant church, and then they lost it for one reason or another.

I can tell you sometimes you don't realize how important that is until you lose it. And I don't think it's an overstatement for me to say this morning to you that the whole of your life is massively affected by whether or not you have a strong, solid, vibrant church. As a Christian, that is critically important. Of course, our prayer is that you would have one here. That's the hope, that's the prayer, that's the work that is given, you know, the attention of the pastors and we're trying to provide that as best we can.

And I think as we started in our study of Acts Chapter 11, it's a series that we have mapped out in six parts. We've called it A Unified Church. We recognize that that is a key characteristic, right? You can't have a strong, vibrant, good, solid church if the church is not unified. And if you struggle with that connection, just invert it. I mean, what kind of strong, vibrant, solid church do you have if it's disunity, if it's disorganized, if it's not harmonious and unified, you've got a hard time saying, "Well, I love my church, it's a great church, but it's filled with factions and division." You need that. And you can't just manufacture it. I can't just say, well, we're going to hire a great marketing department and put some great programs together. If you do all that, you're going to have a great good, solid, strong church.

You can't manufacture it, and in one sense, it's a God-thing, right? I mean, you're Sunday school graduates, you think, you know, it's God, God does that. God causes the growth. God strengthens his church. God does it and I agree 100%. You can't manufacture it, it is a God-thing. But let me say theologically and biblically, it's not random. I can tell you that. It's not random because in Scripture it's clear that there is a relationship between God's strengthening of something, someone, some organization or some nation even, based on the response of those people who are in it.

Asa, for instance in the Old Testament, a few generations from David, doing what he can in the leadership of his country there in Judea. He's faltering in Second Chronicles 16 when God says something through the prophet to him that is quite a remarkable statement. He's told, "The eyes of the Lord they moved to and fro throughout the whole earth seeking to strongly support one whose heart is blameless before him." That's an inviting verse in some sense, isn't it? God's just looking around. I understand that's an anthropomorphism, God doesn't



have eyes and he's not scanning the globe with his eyeballs. But his perception is that he is very interested in bringing his strong support in that case to Asa, if he would just be devoted. It's an interesting Hebrew phrase his whole heart would be there and in it and responsive to what he's supposed to do in trusting the Lord, which was the problem there as he tried to make deals with Damascus.

And you may struggle even with that, that there is this relationship to our obedience and God's blessing. But we need to get comfortable with that because that is the truth. We want to be able to see that God has a gift, an endowment of strength and grace and favor in an organization in the church as it relates to the topic of our discussion when we were doing what he asks us to do. Saul for instance, think about Saul. I mean, a handful generations before Asa Saul was there and he was having his kingdom ripped out of his hands and everything was going down the toilet and Samuel shows up and says, "Hey, if only you would have obeyed the command of the Lord, your kingdom would have been established forever." That sounds like a strong statement. Man, Israel, under your command and your lineage, it would be strong. But it isn't going to be.

So in one sense for us to sit back and say, "Well, I want God to give me a good, strong, vibrant, solid church. That would be great. I want to be part of that. That'd be helpful. Because if Pastor Mike is even close to being right that the whole of our lives is massively affected by the health of our church, I'd like to be in a healthy church." But we've got some responsibilities then. In the series in Acts Chapter 11 we reached the church of Antioch, which is obviously a lot of transplanted Christians from Jerusalem initially. And I want you to see the characteristics of this particular church that clearly is unified. The word is never used that they're unified, but there's no way that you can miss the fact that this is a unified church that is strong and God gives us a line in this that's very familiar throughout the Scripture, if you know this phrase. It has to do with God strengthening of organizations, strengthening of nations, strengthening of churches, strengthening of individuals. He describes it with another anthropomorphism, and that is his hand. His hand was upon them.

Years ago, when we planted this church, we started to see God's signs of strength. And we talked a lot about that Ezra and Nehemiah the "hand of the Lord was upon them," the "good hand of God was upon them," "God's hand was upon them and strengthen them." I mean that's just a great line and it's said of the church in Antioch. And I want to learn from that church to see if we can put the key ingredients that we see here into our church so that your life might be, I mean I can't get around it, massively improved by you being associated with, involved in and participating with a healthy, thriving, solid, strong church.

So take your Bibles, all of you please, take your Bibles and turn to Acts Chapter 11. We're going to study verses 19 through 26. That's my request to you that you look at a Bible. If you don't have a Bible pick up your phone, you've got a lot of books on your phone if you just access the internet, [ESV.org](http://ESV.org). Or there's a Bible there under the seat in front of you, I'm asking you to get your Bibles out right now and to look at Acts Chapter 11 verses 19 through 26. Because if you are a Christian here this morning, you're going to want to be part of a strong, vibrant, solid, thriving church. And we ought to learn how to do that because this isn't going to



happen unless we in large part, large majority, love to think idealistically, if all of us, let's just use superlative terms, all of us do what we see going on here.

Acts Chapter 11 starting in verse number 19. "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen," you remember that, they stoned him, that was when Saul of Tarsus was, this Pharisee, was giving affirmation to the death of Stephen, an early deacon of the church. "They travel as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. Phoenicia, if you know your Old Testament, speaking of Sunday school grads, you've heard of cities like Tyre and Sidon. Those are in Phoenicia. Go to Mount Hermon, if you know the Mediterranean coast, go to Mount Hermon. Go north of that then you're in the area of Phoenicia.

So they're moving north, they're moving out of Israel. But they all came together for the Day of Pentecost, the church is growing, we got years now starting to roll on in the book of Acts and they're all moving north in this case. And Cyprus, do you know what Cyprus is? If you've cruised the Mediterranean, you well-to-do folks, you've cruised the Mediterranean, you've come to the island of Cyprus. It's an island that really is almost due north of Caesarea. It's out there in the Mediterranean Sea because of the tilting coast of Israel. And Antioch and that's our focus. The church at Antioch. Antioch is a city. There are two Antiochs in the Bible. Antioch of Pisidia, that's in modern-day Turkey, we're not talking about that one. But Antioch in Syria, that's up north, north of Phoenicia in this area where you have a church that is being founded and it's going to become the headquarters of the church. It's going to move from Jerusalem really as the hub now in the north of Israel in a place in Syria called Antioch. A very secularized city.

A lot going on there. A very important city. They would say it's probably the third most important city in the ancient world at this particular point. And you had Christians going in there. The Christians who were all led to Christ in Jerusalem there, starting on the Day of Pentecost in Acts Chapter 2, "They were speaking the word to no one except Jews." So we're going into a city. You've got Jews all over the world, the ancient world, and you've got some in Antioch and you've got Christians now coming into these regions, Venetia, Cyprus and to Antioch and they're "speaking the word," the word of the gospel, the word of Christ, "to no one except Jews." And that ought to make you shudder after we've been in this really big emphasis on leading Gentiles to Christ, Cornelius led to Christ.

You should go, that's not right. It's not right because that's not what Christ said. Matthew 28, the great commission of the church, "Go make disciples of..." only the Jews in the nations. No, no. "Go make disciples of all the nations." Acts Chapter 1 verse 8, many, many weeks ago, we studied that passage and we said, look at the concentric circles. Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, a very Jewish place, Judea, a very Jewish place, Samaria, oh, half-breed Assyrian and Jews, and the ends of the earth, oh, the Gentiles. Go everywhere, make disciples of everyone, be indiscriminate in your evangelism, go everywhere.

Well, I'm thinking this isn't a good start to a passage about a good church. Well, here's the good thing. After the contrastive conjunction of the first word of verse 20, we're in good shape now. "But there were some of them, men of Cypress and Cyrene." Now think about that.



Cyrene, well, if you know your geography, this is a hard one, like, you know, upper-class stuff, I suppose. But in the ancient world, you've got the Mediterranean Sea here, you've got Cyprus here, you get Antioch up here, you've got Turkey way over here. Way down here, I mean, you got to go as far as all the way to Greece if you're looking down across the Mediterranean Sea, you've got North Africa here and in North Africa you've got a city on the coast of North Africa named Cyrene. Which you might remember, there was a man who helped carry the cross, Simon of Cyrene, when Jesus was being crucified. He came from that North African city.

So they've come a long way to get all the way up to Antioch, all the way around the Mediterranean coast. And so you've got some who are like they're already like foreigners, in a sense. They're Jewish Christians but they probably came to Jerusalem during the Feast of Pentecost. They got converted to Christ. They then get involved in the church and it's their whole life. They're living in communes there in the early church, no one's got a need, they left their families behind and now persecution leads them way up north. They go through Phoenicia all the way up to Antioch. They settle in Antioch and they're like, "We're not just going to share this to just the Jews."

Some of the men of Cyprus and Cyrene who were coming to Antioch, they spoke to the Hellenists also, the Hellenists, the Greeks, a.k.a. the Gentiles, preaching the Lord Jesus. When you read the bottom of verse 19 and say they were only sharing the gospel with the Jews, and then you hear, oh, but "there were some of them," here now, "preaching the Lord Jesus," to the Hellenists, the Greeks. You should cheer quietly inside, going, "Yay, that's a good thing." And what did God do in response to that obedient indiscriminate evangelism? "And the hand of the Lord was with them." Why? Because he said, "Go make disciples of all the nations." Because he said this isn't just for the Jews only. He said, "Take this to all people."

The pastor in Jerusalem, Peter, was told with this vision, "Don't call common what God calls clean." Go out there and share the gospel with everyone. And here are some guys from Cyprus, the island of Cyprus and Cyrene, North Africa, and saying we're going to do it. We're going to be in this big cosmopolitan city of Antioch, and we're going to talk to whoever, I don't care where they're from, it doesn't matter their ethnic background. I don't care. We're going to share and preach the Lord Jesus and God said, "Yay. Here's what I'm going to do to obedient Christians in Antioch. I'm going to strengthen them."

And here's one practical way he strengthens a church - with great numbers, "a great number who believed turned to the Lord." They turned to the Lord. They turned to the Lord. They became people who are now loyal to Jesus Christ, and what does that do? It unifies the church and numerically strengthens the church. The church is full. The parking lots are full, right? The donut trays are empty at the end of the services. They're consuming fellowship and the teaching of the word. And there are a lot of people now hanging out at church in Antioch.

Verse 22, "The report of this came to the ears of the church of Jerusalem." Here we go again. We got people in Jerusalem going, "It's hard for us to think about people not only from North



Africa, but we got people now sharing the gospel of the Jewish Messiah, the Christ," right? That's what Christ means. "Christos," the Messiah in Hebrew, "Mashiach," the Messiah, the anointed one who was the King of Israel. They said, "The King of Israel is now being glommed on to by Hellenists in Antioch of all places? Barnabas, you better check this out." And they sent Barnabas to Antioch. It was a long way to go, by the way.

Verse 23, "When he came and he saw the grace of God," these people are committed to the real, genuine historical Christ, they're trusting in him for the forgiveness of sins, they're repenting of their sins, they are turning to the Lord, "he was glad." That's a good thing. "And he exhorted them all," both Jews and Greeks, "to remain faithful to the Lord," because what matters is not where you're from. It doesn't matter your background, it doesn't matter your skin color, it doesn't matter your socioeconomic status. What matters is you being "faithful to the Lord," and you need to be faithful with, weird phrase, "steadfast purpose." Literally, your heart needs to be completely in this fully and you need to remain, you need to hold on tight to it.

Well, that's some good, good, good exhortation. Well, it was a good exhortation because he's a good man. "He was a good man." Well, we learned in Luke 18:19, matter of fact I pulled that passage up in our men's conference this weekend to remind you that Jesus said, no one is good, no one is good, "No one is good except God alone." ALERT: Bible contradiction, Bible contradiction. I thought no one was good but God alone. Well, Barnabas too. That's what Jesus meant. No. What are we talking about here? Well we talked about in the sermon the absolute purity of God, the moral uniqueness, the transcendent holiness of God. And when Jesus got a guy here who thinks he's good, the rich young ruler, he says no one is good but God alone, no one is good, absolutely good, but God alone, OK?

So when we're thinking about our salvation, we think about the fact that we do not measure up. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Is Barnabas a sinner? Yep, matter of fact he gets pulled into the sin of Peter in having a double standard when Peter comes to him and he gets rebuked by Paul in the book of Galatians. So he's not perfect, and we know that and the Bible says that, so the Bible's not trying to dupe us here that he's the fourth person of the Godhead. That's not what we're saying here. What we're saying is, relatively speaking, just like it said that Noah was a good man, just like it said that Abraham was a good man, just like it said that Daniel was a good man. These people are called good because they are relatively speaking good as it relates to the others around them.

Even within the church if you started to lay this down in lateral comparisons you can make lateral comparisons and say this is a good man. This is a good woman. This is a good Christian. And of course, one of the reasons he's a teacher is because he's good comparatively to everyone else. He has this kind of standard in his life, this high standard, his commitment to the things that God asks us to do, his spiritual discipline, his devotion to the Lord, his love for God. Oh, things like his connection being in sync with the Holy Spirit. He's "full of the Holy Spirit and he's full of faith." And when other people don't have faith, he has faith. And when other people don't trust and they falter, he's not faltering, he's a strong Christian man. That's Barnabas.





Well, you got a good leader here preaching some good things, and hey, we got a refrain of our song. Here's the chorus of our passage, right? "And a great many people were added to the Lord." Does that sound like a strong church? Strong church. So Barnabas thought we got a strong church here, I got a lot of preaching duties here, the church is growing and growing and growing. Do you know who we could really use in the pulpit here in this church? We could use Saul. Saul of Tarsus, a.k.a. soon to be the Apostle Paul. That would be good.

Now he was in Damascus. He got run out of Damascus. He went into the desert, went into the desert for three years, went down to Jerusalem. Then he got attacked there and the church said, "Well, you got to go." They sent him to Caesarea, he got on the boat, he went off to Tarsus, Tarsus in modern-day Turkey. And so Barnabas is in Antioch and says, "Well, I'm going to run down the street and go get Saul." The problem is that's 120 miles away. This is no small commitment on Barnabas' part. Barnabas is going to travel 120 miles to find Saul of Tarsus to say we could really use some pulpit supply here in the church in Antioch. "So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he'd found him," they didn't have cell phones, they didn't have cell phones, right? So that was, I don't know, took some time. "He brought him to Antioch."

That's another 120 miles, a 240-mile trip. That's a lot of commitment just to get the right leaders in place in this church. "And for a whole year they met with the church and they taught a," here we go again, here's the theme, "a great many people." Why? Because this church is growing. It's strong, it's vibrant. You got good leaders, you got good teaching, you got good evangelism going on, you got obedient Christians in this church. "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."

Now that's an interesting thing. How many times do you think the word Christian is used in the New Testament? This is a Bible trivia question. There are some Sunday school grads here. You should know this. How many times? Three times, thank you. Three times says a staff member, I think said that. Three times. Three times and it is not used as a word that self-describes Christians. It's not used that way. Matter of fact, we see later in the book of Acts, we see this almost disparaging stand. "You're not going to make me one of you guys, a Christian are you?" Or Peter when he talks about the kind of ridicule we get from the world, he says, if you suffer as a Christian. And now we have this. "They were first called Christian," they didn't call themselves that.

They love to call themselves disciples, we're followers of Christ. They like to call each other brothers or sisters. Those were the words they used, familial terms. This was a term and if you looked at it in Greek and maybe your Greek New Testament is open, you can see the ending of that word is the same ending you see throughout Scripture, anytime we get a group of people and we're trying to class them together like the Herodians, talk about the Hellenists, the Herodians. You've got people who are identified with a person and they have this little ending on it in Greek that shows that they're one of those guys. Which is an interesting thing, more on that later, but that is a statement that is being made by the observing culture of non-Christians looking at this growing band of people and they are saying these guys are in that



group. It probably wasn't because of the bumper sticker on the back of their camel. You know, it was because of their lives. It was because of how they lived. It was because of how they assembled, how they were devoted to fellowship, how they were devoted to caring for each other, how they were devoted to obedience to Christ.

We talked about indiscriminate evangelism. Let's just jot that down. Look back at verses 19, 20 and 21, they were all about saying, "I'm not just going to speak to the people I think I should speak to the people. I want to speak to the people that are easy to speak to the people that already know Isaiah 53. I'm going to speak to anyone including Hellenists who never even touched an Old Testament scroll." And God says my hands going to strengthen that kind of church. Number one if you're taking notes, "God Strongly Unifies Our Church...", talk about our church, "When We Actively Engage in Indiscriminate Evangelism," jot that down. When you engage in indiscriminate evangelism, when you say it doesn't matter who it is, I'm going to share the gospel with them and it doesn't have to be the easy one. Not just the person I think would be the ideal convert. But anyone and everyone and you're willing to talk to them about Christ.

We're on week 54 of our study, and we had this little break called COVID but we started many moons ago in the old days, preaching in the book of Acts and the second sermon in the book of Acts was on Acts Chapter 1 verse 8. We included that, verses 6 through 8, I think it was. And it said, "You are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth," and I gave you cards. It's like Kellen had cards passed out. I passed out cards, they had four lines on it. And I said, you need to identify the people in your mind that we can define in a way that somehow parallels these categories: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth. Do you remember that anybody? And I said, we need to start praying for these people, we need to you start caring for these people.

Well, the easy one is the first one, Jerusalem. We said we want to think about people who are already in our sphere, we rub shoulders with them all the time, our immediate family, our closest friends, people that like, are they all Christians? Well, no, there are a couple who aren't. OK. Those people are your Jerusalem. You ought to be sharing the gospel, then you've got to be praying for them. You ought to be thinking about them. And those are the ones where they're not going to freak out when you start talking about your Christianity because they know you're a Christian. It's obvious.

And then there's the Judea, and we said there are people probably in your extended family, like your sister-in-law or your uncle or some cousin, it's like you talk about a lot of things, you get together maybe for a holiday. Of course, there's going to be a statement eventually about what you believe in and your commitment to Christ and so that's your Judea, and there are already bridges built there.

But then there's the Samaria. There are people that like, I don't even think we're anywhere close to being on the same page. And that gets increasingly harder. That's hard for me to think about that. And even if you compare that to the "ends of the earth," there are people that you think, why in the world would I talk to my Uber driver? I don't know. I got nothing to talk to



him about. The reality of these cascading concentric circles, I said we need to not just share Christ with the people who seem like the most obvious targets for our conversations. And God was blessing them when they did exactly what they were supposed to do.

It wasn't a tendency because it wasn't the easy thing. Most people say, "I'm just going to share with people I think it makes the most sense. Hey, you're familiar with Isaiah. You're familiar with Ezekiel. You're familiar with the things that Jesus said. Maybe you've heard them because of course you're a Jew. Yeah, this is all the news among us." So they share the gospel with the easy, low-hanging fruit. But then you had some people from Cyrene and Cyprus going, "We're going to share with whoever."

I said you may struggle with the connection between God is going to bless our church when we obey him because you think, "I'm going to throw a theological flag on that play. I don't believe in work-based righteousness. I don't believe in that." OK. Well, you may say I don't believe that proposition because I have a better theology than you, Pastor Mike, but I'm going to hopefully show you that your theology needs to comport with Scripture and Scripture is very clear about this. I gave you two examples at the outset. Second Chronicles 16:9 talked about there in First Samuel when Saul's kingdom was being ripped out of his hand. But I want you to think about passages like this: First Peter Chapter 2. Turn there once you jot it down. First Peter Chapter 2. Make it 3. Not hard to turn a 2 into a 3.

First Peter Chapter 3. I want you to look at this text written to the church, to Christians, starting in verse 8 going through verse 12. If you'd like to get all the verses before we look at it, there it is. Ready? If Christ said, this is First Peter Chapter 3 verse 8. "Finally, all of you," not all the people who live in the ancient world, it's not all the non-Christians in the neighborhoods, the people who are hearing this read in the church. No. This is all the Christian family, "all of you, have unity of mind." You can only think that would be a command that you'd give to Christians, of course. "Have unity of mind." And that's part of what makes a strong church. "Sympathy," right? You got to get along. We talked about that last week, "brotherly love," you got to have "a tender heart," you got to have "a humble mind." All those things you Christians need to have that.

Oh, and by the way, "Don't ever repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling." It's easy for your mouth to say things you shouldn't say and you're all there talking about stuff at the end of the day. And what did they do in our small group? I can't believe those people. Don't do it. On the contrary you ought to bless. You ought to say good things. You ought to build people up. You've ought to edify them. "For to this you were called." You ought to be trafficking in blessing. Why? Because you were called "that you may obtain a blessing." That's what I want. I want to be blessed. I want God to do good. I want God to say things about me. He's got all the power. When he says good things about me, then good thinking. Some think, "Well, I just believe when God looks at me he only sees Jesus, so I'm already getting an A-plus." That's folly, foolishness, ridiculous and it's heresy.

"Well, you're not a monergistic Pastor Mike?" I'm a monergistic if you want to talk about justification. "I don't even know what you just said." It doesn't matter. If you do know what I





said, I'm going to affirm that I'm monergistic. I believe that. I also believe in a synergistic sanctification, because the Bible's very clear on this. Here are Christians being told this, verse 10, "Whoever desires to love life and see good days." Look at the rest of this verse, does it say "just remember, I do that to everyone that is a Christian because I only see Christ when I look at you?" Underscore that part. "It used to be funny when I used to hear that a long time ago, Pastor Mike. It's not funny anymore." I'm not trying to be funny. I'm trying to tell you that's how people think.

They think, "I will see good days and have good things happen to me because my Father in heaven loves me. Of course, he wants to give me a great church. Of course he is going to give me a strong church. Of course, it's going to be a place where it's going to massively influence my life as a blessing in my life. Of course, it's going to happen because he loves me." Hey, you desire to love life, you want to have a great, let's just apply it to what we're talking about, a great church experience? Do you want to love your church, do you want to see good days in your church?

Well, it's contingent. It's synergistic. It's going to take some effort on your part, like restraining your mouth when you want to say bad things, when you want to unleash on someone. No, "keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit," and other things, even like, if you want to apply it to what we're talking about in the church at Antioch, when you want to share the gospel here and not there, or maybe some of you don't ever want to share the gospel because "I'm not really gifted at that and don't want to get into arguments and I don't want to cram my religion down anybody's throat. So I don't want to do any that."

Well, that's evil and you need to "turn away from that kind of evil and you need to do good," and good is sharing the gospel. For a lot of you you're not sharing the gospel. You haven't shared the gospel. You've been told to share the gospel, it's been now 54 weeks in Acts and you know that you're supposed to share the gospel, but you're not interested in sharing the gospel. Well, you need to do that and you need to "seek peace" when you're having conflict and you need to "pursue it." We talked about that last week. "Because the eyes of the Lord," another anthropomorphism "Anthropos," the Greek word for "man," human, a person, it's the generic word for person and "Morphe" which means "form." You talk about the hand of God, the eyes of God. These are human forms we're using as words to describe something that God does.

We're talking here about his favorable looking, his blessing, his good, his sense of "I am for those folks. I want to encourage and strengthen them." "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous," and we've defined righteousness in the last two verses. "And his ears are open to their prayers." We say, "God I'd like our church to be strong and our church be unified." Well, it's going to take some effort here on our part. "But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." We exclaim, "God would never turn his face against me, I'm his child. And if I pray to go to Disneyland, of course my heavenly Father is going to give me Disneyland." Is that how it worked with your dad?



"Well, there you go again, Pastor Mike, works-based righteousness." I'm not talking about you being kicked out of the family. I'm not talking about him boarding up the house. I'm not talking about him dropping you off at the local park and saying, "I'm done with you." I'm talking about the fact that if you don't make your bed, you don't take out the trash, you don't cut the lawn. Guess what? When you say, "Dad, I'd really like to go to Disneyland," he goes, "Ha, I'm busy reading my magazine right now. I will turn my face away from my disobedient child." We respond, "I don't think God would ever do that to the church. I don't believe he'd ever do that to the church."

Revelation Chapters 2 and 3, maybe you should read that over and over and over again. There are seven churches described in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3, and only two of them, only two of them could you describe this text as those churches. I said the strength and health and vibrancy and unity of a church are not random. It's about our responsiveness to what he's asked us to do, including the great commission and there is this quid pro quo. "You do what I say and things will go good for you. You will love life, you will see good days. When it comes to your church, maybe you'll be at a church like in Antioch and not in Laodicea. That would be good. Not the church at Ephesus. I will say to you that there's nothing here for you to repent of because you're walking in obedience to me."

This is as old as God's covenant relationship with the nation of Israel. He said to them, "I love you. You are my people. I'm not going to cast you out." But then he says, "Listen, you're going to be blessed or cursed based on whether you respond rightly to my commands," Deuteronomy Chapter 11 verses 26 and 28. Deuteronomy Chapter 4 verses 1 through 9. All the texts of the Old Testament that hold before them, as the Bible would say, life and death. If you want it to go well for you, hey, all the way down to kids obeying their parents. "Hey, obey your parents and it will go well with you, live long in the land."

So let's just use indiscriminate evangelism as the top and tip of the iceberg that may represent a lot of things in your life that you say, "Right now I'm doing this, this and this and this in my Christian life, because I think those are the things I like, but I'm not ready to start giving my money to the church. I'm not ready to start serving anywhere. I certainly don't want to talk to my neighbors about Christ." OK, well, your selective obedience is part of the reason maybe that you'll never have the Antiochian church experience. You may end up with a Laodicean church experience where you've got a lot of lukewarm people there. So let's get serious about this. Let's let the majority of our church be this. Let's let the large, overwhelming preponderance of our church be this, and then here's what I think's going to happen. God's good hand will be upon this church. So really, the ball's in our court. That's what I'm trying to say.

Praise God for the men who made up this church that came from Cyprus and Cyrene because they started to get God's attention. And I know we will never have uniformed experience in this church, but let's then make sure you and I are not a part of the rebellious, lazy faction that does not do what God asks us to do. Let's get serious about obedience. And then you know what? You will have a strong, vibrant, enriching church that I guarantee you will have a massive effect on the whole of your life. And I've seen it, some of you have seen it.



Some of you've been a part of a good church, you lost that good church and I'm just telling you you want to be a part of an Antiochian church.

Back to our text. Acts Chapter 11. "That was kind of edgy. That whole point was kind of edgy, Pastor Mike." I know, and it was uncomfortable for you but this part will be uncomfortable for me, this next section. Verse 22. "The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, they sent one of their leaders, Barnabas. He came to Antioch, saw the grace of God, happy, liked it, glad, he exhorted them," exhorted them. Does that sound strong? It is strong. When you hear the words "son of encouragement," that's what Barnabas was introduced to us as, he's the Son of Encouragement, that's his name, Son of Encouragement. That word, you think, "That's the kind of guy I want to go to Starbucks with, Son of Encouragement." He'd probably say some cool things about me. Son of encouragement.

He is the son 'Huios' of "Parakaleo." Parakaleo. This word "he exhorted them" "parakaleo." He is parakaleoing these people. And he's saying, "You got to do something that you may not be in your mind even thinking you need to do, but you need to do it. You need to remain faithful to the Lord," that's going to be hard in a city like Antioch, "and you need to do it and you're going to need a steadfast purpose." Right? The verbal form of the noun parakaleo. Parakaleo is the noun. Parakletos is the noun, parakaleo is the verb I meant to say, if I didn't say that. I shouldn't talk about grammar on Sunday morning, not at the nine o'clock service.

It's the same word, son of encouragement. It didn't mean he went around telling everyone, "Oh, your hair looks great today." Right? "Oh, your smile, you're such a nice person." It means that he is bringing "Para" which means "next to" and "Cleo," calling in things into your life that you need. And here's what the people needed. The Church of Jerusalem needed to say, "Stop dissing on Saul of Tarsus. He's really a Christian, and here's the proof." He engaged in a kind of admonition with them. He exhorted them. We call it, now this doesn't sound as nice, a "Hortatory" kind of preaching. Hortatory is from the word parakaleo. It means that we are strongly telling you, you need to do this. And it's usually coupled with words like admonishing and rebuking.

I want to make sure that if I see something as out of place, I'm going to tell you to fix it. It's not like, "Oh, your hair is really nice." It's like, "No, your hair needs to be combed." That's parakaleo. That's the idea of me exhorting someone. And Barnabas is exhorting them to do something he knows they're going to need, "Remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose." You might think, "Well, he was a power-hungry guy." No, no, no. Verse 24, "he's a good man." "Well, I don't know. He seems to be going beyond what God would want." No, "Full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith. And a great many people are added to the Lord. So Barnabas went," and said, "we need even more leaders in this church. How about Saul? Let's bring Saul in." So he goes all the way to Tarsus. He looks for Saul. He finds him, he brings him to Antioch. And for a whole year, man, now tag-teaming.

And I'm liking to think that maybe Barnabas is the easy preacher, Paul is the hard preacher, but they're both hard preachers, and they're both preaching hard stuff. "They taught a great many people." Now that doesn't say how hard it is, but I don't know, maybe you should look at



some passages that Paul preaches in. I don't know. Let's go to Second Corinthians Chapter 13. Second Corinthians Chapter 13. I quoted this last week. Before we get to 13, go to Chapter 12. Look at verse 20. Well, I guess just to highlight our verb, let's start... I wasn't planning on taking you here but I know it's in the neighborhood. Let's start at verse 19.

"Have you been thinking all along that we've been defending ourselves to you?" It's not like we're trying to be like, "Ahh... were your teachers? Listen to us." No, "It is in the sight of God," God knows, "that we've been speaking in Christ," this is what Christ wants, we're full of the Spirit, "all for your up-building, beloved." We just want the church to be what it's supposed to be, "For I fear that perhaps," verse 20, "when I come I may find you not as I wish." Just like Jesus in the Revelation seven letters to those churches they were not, five out of the seven were not what Christ wished. "I fear that perhaps when I come, I may find you not as I wish, that you may not find me as you wish," there's a threat, "that perhaps there may be quarreling and jealousy and anger, hostility and slander and gossip and deceit and disorder. I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you," like, oh, what a mess, "and I may have to mourn over many of those who have sinned earlier and have not repented of their impurity and sexual immorality and sensuality that they practiced." Man it's not going to be good.

Now, drop down to verse 10 of Chapter 13. The reason I'm writing this letter ahead of time before I get there, "The reason I write these things while I'm away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me," again, here it is, "to build you up for building up and not for tearing down." But it is, here's a word, authority. And he says, "You know, I need you to do what I'm telling you to do." Just like Barnabas said, "You guys, you need to do what I'm telling you to do." Hortatory proclamation of God's word to the people.

Those are people who God has put in place to be gifted leaders in the church and the church at Antioch was responding rightly to it, and we know that by the word that's dropped at the end of our passage, which is the word "Christians." We'll get to that in a minute. But that to me is another reminder of what does the church need to be doing if God's good hand of strengthening and unifying grace is to be upon it?

Well, I know this, number two, you're going to have "God Strongly Unify Our Church," if that's going to happen, well, then you need to "Rightly Respond to Our Gifted Leaders." I told you it would be uncomfortable for me. It's going to be uncomfortable for me to talk about your pastors, but you need to respond to what they say because they have what Paul had even though we're not apostles, and I'll prove that to you in just a second as soon as you write all that down. He has authority, authority, authority to say, here's what you need, here's what you must do.

Some people don't like this church because they've come here and the preaching just seems too hard. They complain, "I don't like that church, it's just too hard, the preaching is too hard. He's always trying to tell us what to do. He shouldn't be telling us what to do. I get enough of that at work all week long. I don't want to be told what to do. I go to college. My professors tell

me what to do and they give me assignments. I don't want to go to church and have the pastor tell me what to do."

Turn to Titus, please. In Titus, Paul is writing a pastor at another island in the Mediterranean, which isn't Cyprus, it's an island named Crete. And if you know this and I think I quoted this not long ago somewhere in one of our series. We were talking about the problem in Crete in Chapter 1, where he says, "There are many, verse 10, Titus Chapter 1 verse 10, "There are many who are insubordinate." By the way, what does that mean? What does the word insubordinate mean? That's a word you use at work with a bad work review. And you know what it presupposes? Structures of authority. You have people who don't like that authority, but they love to talk.

But it's a lot of empty talk and they're deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party, because they got a lot of nit-picky things to say about the pastor in this case. And guess who the pastor is? He's a man named Titus. What kind of name is Titus? It's a good Jewish name. Do you think any Jewish mother would name their kid Titus? No. This is a Roman name. So you got a Roman pastor here, a Gentile. I mean that in the Hellenistic sense. And he goes, "Listen, there are insubordinate people got a lot of people who don't like what the pastor's saying." They must be wooed, verse 11. See it. They must be wooed, wooed, wooed and loved. Give them more stuff in the programming that they want. Be kinder to them. More stories, shorter sermons. Stop demanding so much from them. Don't lay out a reading schedule from the Bible that they have to do. Let them read wherever, however they want.

Do you see all of that in verse 11? "They must be silenced." Because you know what, the order of the church, the leadership of the church, not being responded to. "They're upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain," and they want shameful game, which is not always money. They want like it says in Galatians, they want "to be made much of," that's certainly part of the game they want, "by teaching what they ought not to teach. One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars and evil beasts and lazy gluttons. This testimony is true," therefore, you ought to come up with really clever ways to win them over, "rebuke them." And if you didn't know that the word rebuke is kind of a prickly word, we have two words that Paul adds, "rebuke them sharply." Make sure it cuts. Get down to the core and the nib of this thing "that they may be sound in faith and not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth." That's helpful.

Chapter 2 verse 1. I got some things for you to teach them. "But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine," with the right teaching. Teach the right teaching because there's a lot of people not teaching the right teaching. So you, Titus, are a teacher and you've got a lot of Jews that don't even like the fact that you're not a Jew. But I'm telling you, get up there and teach these guys and teach them this. And if you ever studied this book, there's a ton of stuff in Chapter 2. Do this, this, this, this, teach them this, teach them this, teach them this, teach, teach, teach, all the way down to verse 15.





Now here's a strong word, "declare," strong because it's an imperative verb. "Declare," he says to Titus, "declare these things; exhort, that's the same word we see over there in Acts 11, that's what Barnabas is doing, "and rebuke," when they're wrong, point it out, rebuke them sharply. We've already been told "with all," what's this word, "authority." Well, because you know, Titus, this Roman, he's an apostle too. They think, "No, he's not the apostle, he's a pastor, a pastor on an island in a place where a lot of people don't even respect him. They don't think he went to Sabbath school and he didn't learn the law like we do, and I don't think his Hebrews all that great." And they're insubordinate. And here's Paul, "Declare these things, exhort them and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you." It's a hard, third-person imperative. How do you do that? By the whole structure and tone and position of the way in which you teach. To exhort. A hortatory proclamation of God's word.

They ought to be steadfast, faithful, remain faithful to the Lord. They ought to do what is right. They need instruction. And you know what? The church is growing. I'm going to go get the heavy hitter, the Apostle Paul. He is going to come from Tarsus. I'm going to go 240 miles there and back to have more preachers here who can exhort these people and the kind of people who later in their ministry will write this teacher on Crete and say, "Hey Titus, teach with all authority and don't let anyone disregard you."

These are words that people do not like when they come to church. Church to them is this really flat-lined egalitarian, let's just sit around and figure out what we think about how much God loves us. And yet the Bible says in Hebrews Chapter 13 that you ought to obey your leaders and submit to their authority. You ought to have gifted leaders in your church, and that's a blessing from God to start with, which we talked about not long ago in this series. And now if you have them, here's the congregational mandate. Obey them. Do what they say.

And think about my perspective, I stand up here and say simple things like open your Bibles to Acts Chapter 11. Do you think I get compliance? Do you think I get 100% compliance in this room? I don't. I can't even get you to open your Bible. Do you think I'm going to get you to share the gospel with a non-Christian this week? And yet the Bible says, hey, the health of your church, because the good hand of God contingently requiring your responsiveness to what the Bible says in one sense is are you obeying and submitting to your pastors? I told you you wouldn't like this point. I don't like preaching this point.

A lot of guys want to be pastors because they're on a power trip. And you can think that I'm on one, but whatever. You're wrong, OK, because I'm not. You can ask my wife, I don't even want this dumb job. (audience laughing) I don't. It's hard. I think I could probably be doing better things and maybe even have a boat in the harbor somewhere using my brain for something else, maybe. But instead, I'm here doing this. And it's not because I hate it, I don't hate it, I love this. But here's the thing. God has called you to respond to the leaders of the church by doing what they tell you to do. And the church and the health of the church and the strengthening of God depends on that. Here's the thing your life is massively affected in every area of your life by the health, vibrancy and strength of your church.



It is. Your family can be going bad. Good church, different experience. Your business can be tanking. Yeah, strong church, different experience. Your family, your health, your finances, go on and on and on. You manage that with a strong church, you're going to thrive. A lot of that depends on whether or not you're doing what the Lord asked you to do, and one of the things that the Lord is asking you to do is to do evangelism and respond to the teaching. When they exhort you to do something, you do it. Whether it's doing the Daily Bible Reading, having a ministry post, giving in the offering, whatever it might be. It's what we're called to do.

They're called Christians. You got your worksheet and you see I've got the end of verse 23 and the end of 26. They're called Christians. They're called Christians in that town because, the bottom verse 23, they were "remaining faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose." They were known for their commitment and their loyalty to Christ. OK. They were in their own hearts, not just as a corporate entity, listening and taking notes in sermons, but they went home and they said, "I am going to be faithful to the Lord." And the people around them said these guys are all about Christ. We're going to call them little-Christ, Christians. Right? Which was not a compliment from the non-Christian world, it took a while before Christians started calling themselves Christians.

"But you're right, you want to call us that, we'll take that because we don't mind being distinctive from the rest of the world, we don't mind the fact that you identify us with the person that we love and are devoted to the most, so call us Christians if you want. If we suffer as a Christian," as Peter would later say, "I'll count myself as blessed." We need to be faithful to the Lord. You need to have at the core of your heart in the solitary confinement of your time in prayer in the morning, am I devoted to Christ? Am I remaining faithful to Christ?

If you want to see people in a church that God is ready to bless, his good hand of strength upon them. Well, then number three, you need to "Wholeheartedly Remain Faithful to Christ." And I say wholeheartedly because the word "heart" is in this passage when it says in verse 23 to "remain steadfast with purpose." I mean, literally, this is the word "Kardia" "heart," the heart, like your cardiologist. Your heart needs to stay all wrapped toward this. Your heart needs to be toward this all the time faithfully gripping this and hanging on. This word has a sense, not the word "heart," but the word "remaining" has a sense of time to it. You keep hanging on. You see some movie where someone's hanging from the edge of a building or something. They're hanging on for dear life. That's the picture of this long term, I'm enduring. The writer of Hebrews said, "You have need of endurance, so that you might at the end receive what was promised." You have to endure, you have to hang in there. You have to stay and remain faithful to the Lord. And that's hard in the long haul of things.

One last passage in this. Go to Hebrews Chapter 6. Hebrews Chapter 6. This is what we need, and some of you here, particularly our nine o'clock crowd, you are the kind of people who have been around the block in the Christian life many times and you're starting to get bored. To you, it's old hat. And maybe you've been in this church for 10, 15 years, and now it's like, "Well, it's the same old outlines and it's got all three points and it goes on for 50 minutes and then I got questions. I'm tired of the question. Home Fellowship Group, I don't



know, I'm tired of my Home Fellowship Group. I'm tired of reading the Daily Bible Reading. I want to do some other thing. I just getting tired of it all."

I don't want to say here we're going to have a great church just by having a revolving door when the old guard just gets tired, they just go out and find some other thing to suit their fancy. We'll just keep getting new people and they get excited, just like you were excited when you first got here. But now you're not excited because it's cool because you know it's getting boring for you. It kind of just settled in and then it's not all, except maybe I can find another church and that'll be better and even more exciting. This is what the Christian life is like, is getting in there and hanging in there because I love the Lord. This is my church. We preach about that here recently in this series, and I'm going to hang on. I'm going to keep my earnestness up, my heart up.

Look at verse 11 of this great chapter, Hebrews Chapter 6 verse 11. "We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness," "Spoude," this Greek word. It's the sense of care and concern. It's got a sense of urgency to it and intensity to it. Show that same like intense earnestness that you're all about it. "To have the full assurance of hope." How long? Until the end. Until the end. "So that you may not be," and I've quoted this word many times, it is just fun to say, "okneros," okneros, okneros is the word "lazy," "that you might not be sluggish," which is nicely put. Just don't get lazy in this. Keep being "imitators of those who through faith, and..." oh, you know this word, don't you? "Patience." Patience. This is not the word that you might be thinking that patience like you're "Hypomeno," that you're under the load. It's the word "Markrothymia," that you have this ability to, no matter what the irritation is, no matter what the fatigue is, no matter how restless I am, I'm hanging in there. "And I inherit the promises."

That is what you need. A wholehearted, remaining steadfast, remaining faithful to the Lord. Is church getting old? Things are getting too familiar? Everything predictable around here? You have need of endurance. You have need of showing the same earnestness full to the end. Christians do that, and that's why they start picking up nicknames in the culture that these guys are all about it and they're always all about it and they're always talking about it, even though you got Hellenists and Jews in here. I love the way one historian puts this, "The Antiochians were gradually realizing," these are non-Christians in Antioch looking at the church, "that there was something here," in the church, "which they had not seen before."

But they'd never seen before was not at least the diversity and unity in this church. They were devoted to the Lord. They weren't devoted to the Fall Fest. They were devoted to Compass Active. They weren't devoted to, you know, the Habit Truck. They weren't devoted to the conference. They were devoted to the Lord. And that kept them unified, no matter if you were from Cyrene, Antioch, it didn't matter if you're Hellenists or a Jew from Jerusalem. It doesn't matter where you're from, it doesn't matter who you are. That glued them together.

"The eyes of the Lord moved to and fro throughout the whole earth looking for someone to strongly support." That principle is true not for individuals only but for churches. Let it be true of us that God wants to put his good hand of strengthening favor upon our church as hard as



it might be to incorporate those ingredients in our lives. Because the massive whole of your life is affected by the strength and health of your church.

Let's pray. God, help us in the midst of our distracting culture to realize that, no matter what our job is, no matter what our role in life is, no matter how big our family is or businesses, or how much education I've got piled up and assignments to read and books to read in my economics class or whatever it might be, all of that is affected by whether or not my church is strong, whether it's vibrant, whether it's unified. I pray we could incorporate these things that we've just talked about this morning in a way that would trigger that blessing. We want to love life and see good days. We know we've got to do some things here to make that happen. Thank you, God, for the privilege of evangelism. Thank you for the gift of our leaders. Thank you so much that you loved us so much that you sent your Son to die in our place. Love, so amazing, so divine demands our life, our soul and our all. Let us be responsive in devotion to you every single day of our Christian life.

In Jesus name. Amen