

Acts
Week 12—Just Call Me Christian (Acts 11:19-26)

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I distinctly remember exactly where I was the first time I laid eyes on her. She was stunningly beautiful, and I was instantly, hopelessly smitten. Gold wheels, black paint job, a huge golden eagle on the hood. T-tops, dual exhaust, big 400-cubic-inch motor, sleek new design. I was fifteen years old, sitting in a fast-food place called Burger Chef, which is now defunct, when a brand new Pontiac Trans Am pulled up.

That year, Star Wars debuted. A little company called Apple Computing incorporated. Jimmy Carter was sworn in as President. James Dobson started Focus on the Family. Chuck E Cheese Pizza opened. Serial Killer Son of Sam was captured. The Seattle Mariners played their first game. The New York Yankees won the World Series. Led Zeppelin performed for the last time in the U.S. Elvis Presley did his final concert in Indianapolis at Market Square arena.

The year was 1977, the same year 35 people joined to start Indian Creek Christian Church in Franklin Township. From meeting in a borrowed locker room in a basement, to a bean field to now. Wow! Look what God has done!

The book of Acts details the birth and development of the early church and as we are seeing, one of the themes imbedded in the church throughout Acts is the moving of God's power!

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (Acts 11:19-26)

Do you notice anything? In this one little section of eight short verses, the descriptive phrase "great numbers" is used. I know "it's not about numbers." Some people are consumed with numbers for the wrong motivation. We get that! But it's hard to escape noticing that Luke in this little passage wants to draw attention to the numbers in the growth and momentum of the early church. It is intriguing to consider the power and momentum of the original church in the book of Acts. Trace their numerical growth with me.

- "And the Lord was *adding to their number* day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).
- "*Many*" of those who heard the message believed, and "*the number came to be about 5000*" (Acts 4:4).
- "*More and more*" believed in the Lord; "*multitudes, men & women, constantly added to their number*" (Acts 5:11).
- "*The disciples were increasing in number,*" and "The word of God *kept on spreading*; and "*the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly*" in Jerusalem, and "*a great many*" of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1, 7).

- “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, *being built up*; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it *continued to increase*” (Acts 9:31).
- “It *became known all over* Joppa, and *many believed in the Lord*” (Acts 9:42).

Let’s camp out here in this section of Acts and notice the three seemingly obvious numbers-conscious statements and ask the text what preceded each momentum and growth surge in the fledgling church. Specifically in each instance, what did *they* do and what did *God* do? Simple enough?

Spiritual church power and momentum comes when we align ourselves with God and his agenda, when he works and we cooperate with him.

Exegesis, eisegesis, narscigesis—help me, Jesus.

Let’s make sure we don’t miss this: this cycle of growth was launched by persecution, scattering, and suffering. That’s how this passage begins: “*Now those who had been scattered by the persecution....*”

Over thirty years ago, then-governor of New York Mario Cuomo was considering a run for the presidency. He vacillated and couldn’t decide whether to throw his hat into the ring or not. In one evening interview, sitting in his plush Manhattan office, sipping coffee as the skyline grew dark, he brought up the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. He said,

I dearly wish I’d just get a sign from the heavens. I often wonder why God was so good to Paul. Now here’s a guy by the name of Saul riding along on a horse. God hits him on the tush with lightning and says, “Saul, you better become a Christian and get straight in a hurry. And when it’s all over, you’ll be with me right here eating vanilla ice cream forever” Do you know what an incredible stroke of luck that would be? Can you imagine if you could get hit in the tush with a little lightning: “This is it. This is what you’re supposed to do.” It would make life so simple.

We all know what he was trying to say; we wish God would tell us his specific will for us. But to characterize Paul’s decision and ride as easy? In my opinion there is one word for that: clueless! If the governor knew Paul’s real story of conversion, he’d have heard what God said about Saul’s future” “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). That’s hardly a stroke of luck or eating vanilla ice cream forever is it? So that’s how the text begins.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19-21)

What did the believers do, and what did God do?

1. They looked beyond themselves and God put his hand on them

- “Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story” (Acts 11:4).
- “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18).

I love the language here: “Peter told them the whole story.” “Well then, we have no further objections.” Some went to tell non-Jews the good news about Jesus.

They were mission driven, not member driven. When a church is willing to chase the whole story, and it's members look beyond themselves, God puts his hand on them in greater ways. The “hand of God” brings up multiple scenarios from Scripture. God measures the waters in hollow of his hand. The hand of God holds flashes of lightning. The hand of God is heavy on his enemies, like the Philistines. The hand of God can help us to obey like in Hezekiah's time of revival. The hand of God can discipline. The hand of God can offer blessings like those Solomon speaks of in Ecclesiastes. The hand of God is where Jesus is now seated. The hand of God stretches out for us like in the days of Isaiah. But when the phrase “the mighty hand of God” is used, it usually refers to God's deliverance and power, most often in regard to bringing his people out of Egypt. I believe the hand of God is on this church. Even the Fall Block Party we just celebrated is evidence of that. The hand of God has been so visible for the last 38 years at Mount Gilead, the church where I served. We have a recovery ministry at Mount Gilead that is thriving, contributing to much of the growth of the church. The other day, I happened to walk through the lobby and see one of the ladies from our recovery ministry, Michelle, who had recently shared her story at Testimony Sunday. She commented she couldn't remember which of her sins she shared. Of course, I couldn't resist making a joke and told her she confessed to being a bank robber. She looked at me and said, “Well, actually, Jeff, I spent two years in federal prison for bank fraud.” And I thought, “Well, I'm an idiot.” Luckily she thought it was funny and I could share her story. Some of the greatest things we see happening, happen when we reach out beyond ourselves. And when we do that, God puts his hand on us.

Let's read on to the second section of the text for another clue. Remember, what did they do and what did God do?

2. They majored in encouraging faithfulness to while God displayed his grace

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:22-24)

I love this! Barnabas saw “what the grace of God had done.” Don't miss this: God's grace does something. It is visible! That's why Paul told Titus, “The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation and teaching us.” There's something about the grace of God in a church that is visible.

Organizational consultants rightly identify inadequate ways to describe or measure success: past accomplishments, comparisons, activities, anecdotal evidence. I get that. But the anecdotal evidence is sometimes valuable.

And when he arrives and sees the grace of God, Barnabus encourages to remain resolute and faithful to God.

Did you realize there are three litmus tests for a disciple of Jesus? and they all come from the gospel of John?

1. Keeps my word (John 8)
2. Bears fruit (John 15)
3. Loves one another (John 13)

Sometimes, that anecdotal evidence that we see is helpful because it shows the visible nature of the grace of God. Barnabas (full of the Spirit) encouraged them to remain resolute. One of the reasons we are in this place today, one of the reasons we gather together, is to encourage and provoke one another to love and good deeds.

There was a guy at our church, John, who was a part of the recovery ministry with a heroin addiction. He was baptized, caught on fire for God, and baptized 8 of his friends. One Sunday, I got up and shared John's story, how he was baptizing all his friends. During the early service, I noticed some folks from the recovery ministry trying to get my attention as I shared John's story. Afterwards, they found me and asked, "You didn't hear about John yet, did you? He relapsed last night." So, I didn't tell the story in the second service.

A couple weeks later, John came back to church with his tail between his legs, ashamed. I walked up to him and said, "I'm sure you heard what I said about you a couple of weeks ago in my sermon."

I looked him right in the eye and said, "John, everything I said about you is still true."

We need to be a place where people come in, and we encourage them to remain faithful. We help pick them up after they fall down. And when you do that, God will display his grace. And when he displays his grace, he displays his power. And great things happen in the church.

3. They met for learning and God gave them his Name

All right let's tackle the third numerical reference: "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch" (Acts 11:25-26).

The name "Christian" appears only three times in the New Testament.

- "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch" (Acts 11:26b).
- "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28b).
- "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:16).

The name Christian is also found in extra-biblical sources like Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius. Think about the term "Christian." The suffix on the end of the word Christian simply means, "the adherent of an individual or a party." In other words, the word Christian simply means an adherent or follower of Christ. Before the name "Christian" caught on there were other names in the Bible for followers of Christ that were already in use. For instance, they called themselves disciples, those of the way, believers, saints, brethren, the elect, those who call upon the name of the Lord. Some referred to the believers as the sect of the Nazarenes (Acts 24:5). But the first and most commonly known use of this term is found in the book of Acts.

Some people believe that the term "Christian" was a term that the gentiles used to distinguish Jews who had become believers in Christ from other Jewish people. Another theory is that the term "Christian" was a term of disdain used by enemies of the church to ridicule followers of Christ. Still others believe this was a term the disciples coined to name themselves.

I found something very interesting in my study of this word. Our text says they were first "called" Christians at Antioch. I don't like to throw Greek words around but look at this word:

chreômatizôê (khray-mat-id'-zo), to utter an oracle, that is, divinely intimate; by implication bear as a title:—be called, be admonished of God, reveal, speak.

What is fascinating to me is that this word “called” is almost always used in the New Testament to mean “divinely called.” Do you realize the significance of that? Some scholars believe that the term “Christian” originated in the mind of God, and that it was God who first called believers “Christians” at Antioch. Some scholars believe that the name “Christian” is what God had in mind in the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, till her vindication shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord’s hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (Isaiah 62:1-3)

Now I can’t even spell “skolar,” but I agree. Regardless of the intent of Isaiah, the term “Christian,” in my understanding, is a God-given designation for each of us as believers in Christ. My real name is not Jeff Faull with a “J.” My real name is Geoffry with a “G” and without an “e” at the end. I’ve always hated that name. Even the spellcheck on the computer will not accept the proper spelling of my given name. I will never forget the roll call in the third grade. They say confession is good for the soul so I have a confession to make. The teacher came to my name and instead of saying “Geoffry Faull,” she called me “Godfrey Fools.” I vowed from that day forward not to use my real name. So began a series of events that have caused me difficulty to this day. When I applied for my social security number I gave the name Jeff Faull. Consequently the name on my social security card does not match the name on my birth certificate. The name on my driver’s license does not match the name on my credit cards. As I’ve grown older. I’ve come to appreciate the original name my parents gave me, but now it is too late. If my name appeared correctly in an article or on church letterhead, no one would know who I was, or at least everyone would think I was changing my name because of a mid-life crisis. So I remain Jeff with a “J” instead of Geoffry with a “G” in spite of difficulties. If only I had gone by the name my father gave me.

A similar thing happens in the religious world. Our Father has given us the name “Christian” and all kinds of well-intentioned, spiritually minded people designate themselves by different names, some more appropriate and more acceptable than others, but it’s sometimes confusing. Why not stick with the name our Father first gave us, “Christian”?

Recently a friend of mine had a discussion with a co-worker who claims to know the Bible very well. The co-worker says he believes in Christ, he’s been baptized into Christ, and that he tries to live for Christ, but he insists that he is not a Christian. He is one of those people who likes to argue and is against “organized religion.” My friend came to me wanting advice as to how to deal with someone who is so frustrating. I said, “Well, it’s simple. Agree with him! If he says he’s not a Christian, then he’s not a Christian. If he won’t claim the name, he’s not in the game.” I’ve yet to hear how that approach turned out.

Paul never fell for this “your religion’s right for you as long as you are sincere,” “there are many paths to the same place,” “there are many ways to God” politically correct religious potpourri theology we swallow so willingly today. He was out to win the world and convince people to be Christians. And he didn’t just do that with words. He did it with his life. He modeled what it meant to be a Christian and he encouraged believers to live up to the name by which they were called. “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1).

At a recent meeting of The American Heart Association, 30,000 doctors, nurses, and researchers met in Atlanta to discuss the importance of a low-fat diet plays in keeping our hearts healthy. Yet during

mealtimes, they consumed fat-filled fast-food such as bacon cheeseburgers and fries at the same rate as people from other conventions according to food services. When one cardiologist was asked whether his intake of high-fat meals set a bad example, he replied, “Not me, because I took my name tag off.”

I always liked the diagnostic question that became popular in the 1970’s. “If you were arrested for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Mark Cuban, IU business school grad and partial owner of the NBA’s Dallas Mavericks, offered WGN Chicago Radio sports-talk host David Kaplan \$50,000 to change his name legally to “Dallas Maverick.” When Kaplan politely declined, Cuban sweetened the offer. Cuban would pay Kaplan \$100,000 and donate \$100,000 to Kaplan’s favorite charity if he took the name for one year. After some soul searching, and being bombarded by e-mails from listeners who said he was crazy to turn down the money, Kaplan held firm and told Cuban no. Kaplan explained: “I’d be saying I’d do anything for money, and that bothers me. My name is my birthright. I’d like to preserve my integrity and credibility.”

“Christian” is the birthright name of every follower of Jesus Christ. There are so many different ways to say this when it comes to the name “Christian.” We should wear it, we should share it and we should bear it. We should make a claim of the name, spread the fame of the name, and endure the pain for the name. We should embrace it, explain it, and endure for it. But the bottom line is when it comes to being a Christian, I want to be one, I want you to be one, and I want to remain one. These chapters are full of the power of grace, power of angels, power of synergy, power of the whole story, power of suffering, power of persuasion, power of proclamation, resurrection, generosity, inclusion. But enmeshed in all this is the power of the Name of Jesus. There is no other Name.

There is a big-time secret, perhaps one of the greatest spiritual laws of the universe. The purpose of God is an unstoppable juggernaut, a bulletproof battering ram, an irrepressible force. If you get on board with the purpose and the promise of God, you cannot be defeated. If you don’t, you will be left behind. If you get in the way, you will be crushed.

At some times in history, this is more evident and obvious than at other times, but it is never less true or untrue at any time. If you read the story of the Bible through this prism, it will revolutionize your understanding of Scripture. If you view and live your life by this principle, you will never be the same.

We have three choices as individual believers and as a church:

- Align with God and be unstoppable,
- Fail to align with God and be left behind, or
- Get in the way of God and be crushed.

Moses got in line with God’s purpose and promise and became unstoppable. Some of the Israelites failed to align and were left behind. Pharaoh and the Egyptian army got in the way and got crushed.

Samson got in line with God’s purpose and promise and became unstoppable; when he failed to align he was left behind. When the Philistines got in the way they were crushed.

When David got in line with God’s purpose and promise he became unstoppable. When the people failed to align, they were left behind. When Goliath got in the way he was crushed.

Paul got in line with God’s purpose and promise and he became unstoppable. If he had walked away, he would have been left behind. If he had stayed in God’s way, he would have been crushed.

As a matter of fact you can take any Bible character about whom we have enough information and figure out which path they took. The Serpent, Pharaoh, Goliath, Nebuchadnezzar, Sennacherib, Jezebel, Ahab, Herod, Caesar, and every other enemy of God found out you'd best not stand in the way of God's mission.

Align with God and be unstoppable or fail to align with God and be left behind or get in the way of God and be crushed.

It's how Joseph could say, "You meant it for evil; God meant it for good." It's why Paul says, "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (2 Corinthians 13:8). It's why Jesus is described as a chief cornerstone that holds up the superstructure of your life or a stone of stumbling that trips you and crushes you. That's why we are promised answers to our prayer when it is according to his will.

It's why Christianity is the wisdom of God to those who believe and nonsense to those who are perishing. It's why we are an aroma of life to some and a stench of death to others. We are either aligned with the unstoppable purposes of God or we are not. Even those who opposed the early church knew they might be fighting God. That's why Gamaliel said, "But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." Align with God and be unstoppable or fail to align with God and be left behind or get in the way of God and be crushed.

I believe that there are mission driven people here who look beyond themselves. I believe that hand of God is on the Creek, and that the grace of God is visible here, and solid teaching happens here. I believe there are faithful, encouraging and encouraged disciples of Jesus here, and people who proudly wear, share and bear the name "Christian" here.

Let me lend you my outside eyes today. Do you realize what you are a part of here. Do you have any idea of how impactful your church community has been? The cumulative power God has harnessed here? People who have launched ministries from this place. Leaders who have been trained here. Generosity that has been multiplied. Souls that have been won. Lives that have been turned around. Relationships that have been forged. Worldviews that have been shaped. Evil that has been conquered. You can see the grace of God and what it is doing here. You can see great numbers of people here. You can see the mighty hand of God here.

Erwin McManus, in his book "The Barbarian Way," points out that most groups of animals have unique names or designations when they are together. For instance, bees are a swarm, ants are colonies, whales are pods, fish are schools, cattle are herds, birds are flocks. McManus goes on to say, "If you watch 'The Lion King,' you know a tribe of lions is a pride, crows are murders, and tigers form an ambush." He points out that a group of buzzards is called a committee and he claims that that one insight is worth the price of his whole book. Groups of flamingoes are called flamboyants, which for some reason reminds McManus of TV evangelists. Owls are called parliaments.

But listen to what he writes about rhinos.

My favorite of all is the group designation for rhinos. You see, rhinos can run at 30 miles per hour, which is pretty fast when you consider how much weight they are pulling. They are actually faster than squirrels which can run up to 26 mph, and even then, who's going to live in dread of a charging squirrel? Running at 30 MPH is faster than a used Pinto will go. Just one problem with this phenomenon: rhinos can see only 30 feet in front of them. Can you imagine something that large moving in concert as a group, plowing ahead at 30 MPH with no idea what's at 31 feet? You would think that they would become far too timid to pick up full steam, that their inability to see far enough ahead would paralyze them to immobility, but with that horn pointing the way, rhinos

run forward full steam ahead, without apprehension which leads us to their name. Rhinos moving together at full speed are known as a crash.

McManus concludes, “You got to love that. I think that's what we are supposed to be. The church becomes a crash, an unstoppable force. We don't have to pretend we know the future. Who cares we can only see 30 feet ahead. Whatever is at 31 feet needs to care that we are coming and better get out of the way.” We do this not in arrogant, obnoxious condescending off-putting self-oriented, and distorted way but in a humble, grateful, self-sacrificing, magnetic, and compelling way.