

Planting A New Church

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[0 : 0 0] Well, what is the church? What should the church be like? What does the church do? How does God work through the church? As you've been following us in our study in the book of Acts, we've seen how Jesus has been building his church. In our Bible readings this afternoon from Acts chapter 11 and then verse 13, you'll see that the focus is on the church in Antioch, how the church was planted, how it grew, and how it was established. So the new church was planted through persecution and it included Jews and Gentiles for the first time. It was where the disciples were first called Christians and it was the first missionary sending church as it sent people out to the ends of the earth with the good news of Jesus. And so as we look this afternoon at the church in Antioch, there's so much for us to apply to our own situation here as Christ Church Glasgow. But before we do look at the passage more closely, let me just make a few comments about Antioch as a city. Antioch was a big city, had an estimated population of at least 500,000. The Jewish historian Josephus called Antioch the third city of the third city of the empire after Rome and Alexandria. It was a cosmopolitan place, it was urban, it was pluralistic, it had a rich and vast variety of human experience, and in so many ways it's like Glasgow, no different from any big city in our world today. But it was into this great city of Antioch that a new church was planted, it grew, and it flourished. And so there's much for us to learn at Christ Church Glasgow as we seek to be a church here in this city today. And so what I'm going to do this afternoon is point to 10 things in the church in Antioch that we should look for in our church.

But don't worry, don't think, oh this is a 10-point sermon, this is going to be massively long. Each point is different, most of them are short, some of them are shorter than the others. So we're going to work through and see what we can learn from the church in Antioch. So the first thing is that it was a witnessing church, and we see this in verse 19 and 20. Let me read those verses again. 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 were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, and they went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. Now this picks up on what Luke had said earlier in Acts chapter 8 verse 1, where the believers were scattered because of persecution. So persecution in Acts doesn't hinder the progress or the advancement of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Persecution actually advances the spread of the gospel further and wider. And this is how the new church in Acts in Antioch was appointed, sorry, how it was planted. So the believers, some of them go to Jews and some go to Greeks, that is Gentiles, and tell people about Jesus. And so who is it that does this witnessing? Well, it isn't the apostles. You'll notice from the text the apostles aren't mentioned.

It's the anonymous believers who go and speak to those around them about Jesus. And that's how this new church gets started. And I guess at the very beginning, there was no church building. There were no church services to invite people to. It was too early. So it was a case of go and share. So the church had to do rather than come and hear. And in many ways, the context is not really that different from secular Scotland today. Because if we ask the question, well, how are people going to hear about Jesus today in Scotland? Well, it will be through those of us who belong to the church of the Lord Jesus and who bear witness to him amongst the people that we know. We need to go and share the good news of Jesus with others. Because people aren't banging down the door of the church. There was no queue outside the church this afternoon when you came in for 4pm. People aren't doing that in our society today. And so we can't really rely on buildings or structures or services or ministries or activities to do our work. All these things, of course, are important. And I'm excited about our upcoming Vision Day for Christ Church Glasgow. But whilst it's great to have strategies and plans and programs, we don't need to wait for them before we go and

share the good news of Jesus with other people. And we don't even need to think that those things will be the key to success. What we need in all our churches are people who are willing to speak about Jesus to those around them, to our neighbors next door, to our colleagues at work, to our course mates at school or university, to our friends at the sports club. Somebody said that evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find the bread. And so how could we be better equipped at telling people about Jesus?

[5 : 52] Well, I wonder if you've ever tried something like the word one-to-one. We've spoken about it before, which is really John's gospel in a little booklet, the whole text, which is a good way just to read through with somebody. And I'm sure all of us share our lives with different people throughout the week.

But how good would it be if we were able to share something of the message of Jesus as we open up God's word in the Bible with them? So let's be thinking about how our witness to Jesus can weave its way into the normal things we do on a day-to-day basis, into our routines and the priorities of our lives. So that's the first thing. Let's be a witnessing church. Second is Antioch was a dependent church.

Verse 21 says, The Lord's hand was with them. And that's the key. The Lord's hand was with them. That is the secret to their success, if you could call it success. Except it is really no secret. Because the hand of the Lord, as it was on these ordinary believers, was the key to the church being planted and growing and being established. So it's not just about being good witnesses, as if we've got the skills to be able to convert people and have them come into church. No, we've got to be entirely dependent on the Lord.

Because unless the Lord's hand is with us, nothing will happen. In other words, we need to depend upon the Lord to build his church. We can't think that it's all on us, that we've got the ability or we've got the ingenuity to do it ourselves, because we'll get nowhere fast if that is our approach. So let's be a dependent church, dependent upon the Lord. The Lord's hand must be with us if we're going to grow.

Which is the next thing to see about the church. In Antioch, it was, thirdly, a growing church. A growing church. And the growth of the church in Antioch is described in terms of a great number of people. And Luke highlights this growth three times in the passage. So just see verse 21, where we read a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Then see verse 24.

[8 : 21] And a great number of people were brought to the Lord. And then look down again at verse 26. We read again of great numbers of people. So the church was growing because the Lord's hand was with them. But then the question is, well, what does church growth look like? Well, of course, it's numerical. So people being added is church growth. But did you notice, verse 24, it wasn't about them being brought to church in Antioch. But it was about people being brought to the Lord. Or verse 21, people turned to the Lord. So the church was growing, not because more people turned up at Christ's church, Antioch, but because they turned to Christ. And that's what makes you a church member. You're one of the Lord's people if you believe in Jesus Christ. And we've been saying that all along through our membership process. You're part of the church if you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. And so it's great to have people here every week. But if you're here, the question is, are you one of the Lord's people? Have you turned to him? Do you belong to him?

Because that matters more than belonging to Christ Church Glasgow. You need to belong to the Lord. And so church growth happens when people believe in Jesus Christ. And it's worth stating this because some of what is regarded as church growth today isn't actually church growth. Lots of the time it can just be church transfer. As Christians go from one church to another church to another church to another church, moving around the city, going to different places. That's not church growth, is it?

It's just shifting people around from one seat to another seat somewhere else. And so whilst churches might have an increase in attendance, they'll only be growing if people are turning to the Lord.

And so we want to be a growing church. Our denomination wants to plant churches that reach new people who will turn to the Lord. So that's the third thing, a growing church. The fourth, a faithful church.

Look at verse 22 to 24. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw that 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. So the impact of this new church in Antioch had reached the church headquarters in Jerusalem. And so they sent Barnabas to oversee the new congregation.

[11 : 27] What do we know of Barnabas? Well, Barnabas was his nickname because it means encourager. And that is what Barnabas did and was good at. And that's what he did when he arrived in Antioch. So we read that he saw what the grace of God had done. So he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. So Barnabas could see that the believers in Antioch were genuine.

They were the real deal. And that's why he encourages them to remain faithful to the Lord. He could see that the grace of God had been at work in their church and in their lives.

And that's, I guess for me, one of the enormous privileges in my role as your minister. Because over these past weeks, it's been a real joy to conduct membership interviews, to hear what the grace of God has done in your lives. And so let's be a faithful church and remain true to the Lord with all of our hearts because of that good work that God has done in us and started in us and will complete. And also because of the grace of God at work here in Christ Church Glasgow, let's continue to be faithful to him. Okay, fifth point. Antioch was a teaching church. Look at verse 25, 26. 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. So as these great numbers of people were brought to the Lord in Antioch, well, what did they need? Well, they needed to grow as disciples and growth could only come through teaching. And that's why Barnabas goes and he recruits Saul to the leadership team and he brings him on board because Saul would help by nurturing the new believers towards maturity. Saul was the right man for the job. Jesus said that he was the apostle to the Gentiles. Saul, as a Pharisee, was steeped in the scriptures of the Old Testament, but also as a Roman citizen, he spoke Greek. So he was familiar with the culture in a city like Antioch so he could engage with people well. And so while it was this group of unknown believers who planted the church in Antioch through their evangelism, it was Barnabas and Saul who developed the church through their teaching. Because that's the only way a church will develop. And this is emphasized by the fact that Barnabas and Saul taught the church for a whole year. So they had a year-long

[14 : 20] Bible class, if you like. And this is in contrast to the constant movement that we've seen so far in Acts. People don't hang around for long in places in Acts up until now where it's seen that the priority is this young church in Acts needs two people to stay with them for a year to teach them the apostolic faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so what does this mean for us? Well, we all need to be taught if we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus and also a mature church. And that's why the teaching of God's Word Sunday by Sunday is a priority and why we meet in community groups through the week to study and apply God's Word together. So we want to be a teaching church. That's number five. Number six, Antioch was a distinctive church. Look at the end of verse 26. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

So these early believers were such a distinctive group, it seemed like the people in the city of Antioch had to come up with a name for them, to describe them. And they were called Christians because, well, they believed in Jesus Christ and they spoke about Jesus Christ and they called Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. And so this new and rapidly growing movement couldn't just be known as Jewish religion or Greek religion because it was made up of Jews and Greeks. And I guess that's because throughout human history, people have always thought that your religion is just part of your culture, where the place you come from defines what you believe. And that's why you might sometimes hear people say, well, I'm Catholic because I'm Irish or I'm Hindu because I'm from India or I'm a Muslim because I'm from Iran. But here, for the first time, people belonged to a cross-cultural community because they were united together in Jesus Christ. They were a new kind of humanity, the likes of which had never been seen before. And so shouldn't we be a distinctive community that causes people to ask of us, what kind of people are these? They call themselves Christians, but they just seem so different, but in a positive way.

I remember chatting to a man called Bruce Milne, who is from Dundee, I think, originally, but he spent most of his time over in Vancouver as the minister of a church there for a couple of decades, I guess. And I remember him speaking to a group of us and he said that in the city of Vancouver, they had an award for the organization in the city that made the most distinctive and best

contribution to the well-being of the city. And his church, which is called First Baptist Church, I think, his church won the award two years in a row. And so the mayor of the city said to Bruce Milne, it's amazing that you've got such a diverse group of people in your church and they all seem to do so much and contribute so positively to the life of our city. And Bruce Milne just turned to him and said, and this is what he said to us, he said, well, doesn't that tell you something about Jesus?

That Jesus can bring together such a diverse group of people united together in love with one another and sharing a common vision for what they're about, their mission, what they should do. And so we should be a distinctive church, shouldn't we? Distinctive because we're made up of different people who come together as Christ followers, as Christians. Okay, number seven, the church in Antioch was a generous church. And this is in verse 27 to 30. And so there's this prophet called Agabus, great name, he predicts a famine. And Luke seems less concerned about the famine than he does about the generous response of the church in Antioch to the famine. So verse 29 says, the disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gifts to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. So they decided to give what they could to help their fellow believers in Jerusalem. So they didn't wait before the famine, or they didn't wait for the famine to come before they gave. Instead, they gave generously in advance by sending their gift with Barnabas and Saul. So this wasn't forced, it was generous.

[19 : 25] And notice that the gift was given specifically for the church. And so here's the new church plant in Antioch, supporting the mother church in Jerusalem. They wanted to generously bless those who'd been such a blessing to them by giving them the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so as we apply this, well, shouldn't the natural response of the church be when Jesus has impacted our lives, when he's impacted our church, shouldn't our natural response be generosity? Give to God's church so that his work can advance. Be generous because, well, we want to be generous because the Lord Jesus Christ has been generous in giving up his life for us. So we want to give for his work in this world. And that's what the believers in Antioch did, giving as each one was able. Because it says we give to Christ's church that Jesus Christ accomplishes his work in this world. So let's be a generous church.

Then eight, the church in Antioch was a diverse church. So Luke picks up on the church in Antioch again in chapter 13. In verse one, he says, now in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manan, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. So the diversity of the church is reflected in its leaders. Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus. Simeon, called Niger, was a black African. Lucius from Cyrene, also in North Africa. Manan seems to be an aristocrat, having been brought up in King Herod's palace, his household.

And then Saul, or Paul, was a well-educated Pharisee from Tarsus. All very different men. But these leaders represent a culturally rich and diverse church. And a diverse church is a fantastic witness to the truth and beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so it's great for me to look out here today and see people from all different places around the world who've come and landed in Glasgow.

And again, it points to how Jesus transforms all kinds of people and welcomes us into his family. So we want to be a diverse church that reflects our city. So the people who walk around the streets around this building can come in and see people like them in here and feel that they too can be part of our church. Number nine, the church in Antioch was a worshipping church. Verse two, chapter 13 says, while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So they worshipped the Lord. And this is obvious, and it should go without saying, but it's probably worth saying anyway, that God's people must be committed to worshipping him together. So as in Antioch, so in Christ Church Glasgow, God works when we meet together for worship. So that means, well, we miss out if we're not here to worship with God's people.

Because it's in worship that we hear God speak. It's in worship that God by his Spirit transforms our lives. It's as we worship that we bring our prayers together to God, that we grow as disciples, that we fellowship with God's people, and that we're reminded of our calling as Christian believers.

[23 : 35] So we need to meet together for worship, not just when we feel like it or when we're on the rota for something. We need to worship regularly with God's people. I've been in pastoral ministry for long enough to know that the majority of people's pastoral problems, like 90 plus

percent of pastoral problems, all come because people aren't committed to regular worship and to the ordinary means of grace.

Because if we drift in and out of church, it's no surprise that we will struggle as Christians. But it's being in church, hearing God's word, worshiping with God's people, being prayed for and with others, that we grow, that we mature, that we become strong and steadfast disciples. Because God does his work in us when we worship him together. And so we must be a worshiping church. And now number 10, sending church. Verse 3, chapter 13. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. So the church in Antioch sent out the first ever missionaries. So up until this point in Acts, all the people had been sent out as the good news of Jesus spread. It was because of persecution. They'd been forced to go to different places. But now for the first time, the church intentionally sends people out on mission. Not only that, but they send out their best people.

Because Paul and Barnabas sail for Cyprus. And what was Paul's first missionary journey? So the greatest missionary advancement the world has ever seen began here, flowing out from the church in Antioch. And so God's plan was to send out their most capable leaders to plant and establish new churches all across the world. And that's why it's so exciting to send out David, David Trimble, to plant a new church in Glasgow. Because sending people out from church to start new churches, it's not an abnormal or unusual thing. It's a normal part of the mission and ministry of the church. So it goes on all through the New Testament. And so by God's grace, we want to be ascending church. So let me just run through them again. A witnessing church, a dependent church, a growing church, a faithful church, a teaching church, a distinctive church, a generous church, a diverse church, a worshiping church, a worshiping church, a worshiping church. But for success in all of this, the Lord's hand must be with us. Verse 21 of chapter 11. Because the Lord's plan is that the good news of Jesus Christ should go out to the ends of the earth. How does it happen? Well, it happens as disciples of Jesus Christ, witness to him, grow and mature in him, and are generous because of him. Because they belong to churches that love him, where people love one another and love the people in this world.

And when the Lord's hand is with us, then, well, we get a front row seat to see the work that God is doing. And so as I bring all this together, let me just end with a story or a parable that I read in a book to pull it together. It's about the life-saving station. And it goes like this. On a dangerous seacoast, there were many shipwrecks, and there was once a little life-saving station.

[27 : 38] The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat with a few devoted members keeping watch over the sea. They went out day and night searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by the little station so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time, money, and effort to support its work. New boats were bought, new crews trained, and the life-saving station grew. Some of the members were unhappy that the building was so basic and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they enlarged the building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely. And they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going out to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. But the life-saving emblem still hung above the club's door, and the people still regarded themselves as life-savers. About this time, a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was in chaos, so the property committee had a shower built outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose, and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station, but they were voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people in the dangerous waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast. So they did. As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes as the old. It evolved into a club, so another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in the dangerous waters, and the life-saving stations just leave the people to drown. Challenging parable, isn't it? But you can see what it

illustrates, because the church is like a life-saving station. Churches have always been planted because there are so many people who need to be saved. Christ Church Glasgow was planted because there are many people in Glasgow who need to hear the saving message of Jesus Christ, and our mission is to point people to Jesus, because we want them to see his beauty through our words and deeds.

And we are only here, we only exist, you are only a Christian believer if you are one, because of the generosity of the Lord Jesus Christ and giving up his life to die on a cross for us. Jesus died to make us his own. He loves his bride, the church, and he's brought us together as his people so that we can show him to the world and represent him well out in the world. So Jesus could not care more about his church, and it's only when we have experienced his love in saving us that we will truly embrace his mission and go out in his name so that others might be saved by him too. Amen.