

Strong foundations for a Christian church

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have a Bible, you can turn back with me if you're using a church Bible. It's! on page 1092 as we continue to think about the opening section of this wonderful book where we see the mission of Jesus going to the ends of the earth. But here, our focus is on strong foundations for a Christian church. Think about that idea of taking a survey or of assessing foundations. We had a surveyor in this week with the digital tape measure and the high ladder with the torch and the clipboard. And it's really important when you're buying or selling a property to be able to check the structural integrity. It's crucially important, of course, to have solid foundations.

Think across the city, not that far away, Castle Rock. You know, why is it that since the Iron Age there have been forts built on top of Castle Rock? Why was it in the late 11th century the royal family of Scotland decided to build and make their home, their castle, up on that rock? Well, surely, as much as it's a good vantage point, it's because the rock is solid. Strength and security became tied to foundations. So, Luke is still giving his introduction to the book of the Acts of Jesus by the Spirit through the apostles. And here, we have a chance this morning to examine the foundations of the first church. We're going to learn about the priorities of Jesus for his church. And we're going to see something of the mission of Jesus through his church. And that's important because the same rock-solid foundations we find in Acts 1 are the same rock-solid foundations we need today.

Yes, we are a church in a different age. Yes, we're a different culture. But still, the same principles apply. And as we dig down to see the foundations, we're going to see priorities of prayer, of the Word of God, of the importance of God's people being witnesses. As we lift the flooring, we're going to see how the unstoppable mission of the Lord Jesus is going to continue in the world through the Spirit and by his church. And this matters. So, again, I know some of you, you're new to the city, you're new students. You need to know this is the kind of church that Jesus wants you to be in. You need a solid foundation for your spiritual growth to know how to serve Jesus while you're a student. If you're here today and you're new to Christianity, you're exploring what it's about, again, this is important for you because here are the fundamentals for a Christian church. Here's what it looks like when a group of people put the Lord Jesus at the center of their life. And for those of us who belong to this church, we need to examine the foundations for our own lives. As we hear the priorities of Jesus, to ask ourselves, are these my priorities? As we think about the mission of Jesus, am I actively on that mission with the people of God together here in Becclew? So, this morning we'll see that Jesus builds his church upon unchanging priorities and his unstoppable mission. So, two things to think about. First, we need to think about the unchanging priorities for Jesus' church. If you missed it last week, the story so far, as Luke records it, here is the risen Lord Jesus and he's been teaching his apostles for 40 days about the kingdom of God.

And he's telling them to wait for the Holy Spirit because when the Holy Spirit comes, they'll be sent as witnesses, starting in Jerusalem but going to the ends of the earth. So, we're still in a time of waiting. But this isn't a, you know, sitting back doing nothing kind of waiting. This isn't a filling up with noise, scrolling around and distracting themselves kind of a waiting. It's active waiting.

[4 : 35] They're applying the priorities that they know Jesus has to their lives from the very beginning. So, here's the first priority that we see. It's the priority of prayer. So, look at verse 12 through verse 14. We hear the apostles come back to Jerusalem as they were told to do and when they arrive, they go upstairs to the room. So, you've got the apostles and then verse 14, they all join together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

So, a couple of things to notice. First, notice the unity of the church as they pray. So, we've got the apostles. So, we've got those who've been appointed as leaders. We've got women who are

followers and supporters of Jesus' mission. We've got Jesus' own mother, Mary. We've also got, and it's really significant that Luke says, Jesus' brothers or his half-brothers were there too. Now, these were the guys that were really skeptical of Jesus' claim to be God's promised king. They thought he was crazy until they saw him risen from the dead. So, now they're gathering together to worship. So, there's this sense that they're all together, they're all worshipers, and they're all doing the work of prayer.

So, there's unity. But notice the little word, that's a fairly long word, constantly in verse 14. That speaks to us of perseverance in prayer. This isn't a one-time thing. This is an ongoing commitment. This is going to be the pattern and the rhythm of the life of this church. And there's a purpose to their prayers. What's the purpose? Well, surely they're praying, asking the Lord Jesus to keep his promise to send the Spirit. And they're asking for power and help so that they might, in the fullness of time, be his witnesses. To read the book of Acts is to discover that for this first church, prayer was the air that they breathed. Acts 2.42 is one of the many summary statements you get of the church.

Here's what they devoted themselves to, to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. And it shouldn't surprise us, and it shouldn't surprise us that Luke highlights them praying, because Luke highlights the praying life of Jesus. And remember, the apostles, they've listened to Jesus, and they've watched Jesus. So, they've heard him teach about prayer. They've watched him go to make time by himself, so that he can be with his father to pray. They've also heard him pray in their presence to his father, so that the disciples can listen and learn. And they know that even as Jesus faced the cross with all that would bring, he prayed for strength to do the father's will. And so, as we get into the book of Acts, we'll find this church praying as a way to express their worship, as a way to seek wisdom that they need. When some of the believers get thrown in prison, they hold a prayer meeting for them. And when they get released from prison, they pray again that the church would continue to have boldness to speak for Jesus. The church of Jesus is a praying church. As Spurgeon put it in the 19th century, a praying church is a powerful church. John Stott in the 20th century, the missionary church is a praying church. Francis Chan in the 21st century, a church devoted to prayer is a church devoted to

[8 : 29] God's mission. Every century, every generation, it is the same. The church of Jesus must be committed to prayer. Where do we fit within that call? We need to be a praying church, and you and I as Christians need to be praying Christians. On Sundays, when somebody's up front praying, we add our amen. We're actively praying along. In community groups or in small groups, we have an opportunity to share prayer requests and needs together. Maybe it's just in our home or in our flat with other people. We build spiritual friendship through prayer. And specifically, when we think about what they're praying for in the book of Acts, we pray for spirit-driven witness. We pray for help that we could show Christ as we serve others. We pray for help to walk worthy of the Lord Jesus. That we would ask for opportunities to show something of His love, and we would take those opportunities when we're given. That we would pray for the help to give good answers when someone asks us, why have you got so much hope? That we would pray for spiritual breakthrough when we recognize there is so much darkness. That we would pray for those who are sent all around the city, all around the world to share the good news of Jesus. We need to pray for the mission of the church so that God gets the glory and we are seeking the power and the grace and the help that we need. So that's one unchanging priority for us to reflect on. Here's the second. It's the Bible.

It's the Word of God. It's there in verse 15 to 22. There is something, I think, about the best teachers. Some of us, maybe you can think about your teachers, primary school, high school. Some of you are waiting to discover what your lecturers are going to be like. But I think the best teachers help us to see and understand a subject in new ways and with greater depth. My favorite Scottish history lecturer was able to take, you know, ancient gravestones and Celtic folk songs and land-holding records and weave them all together into a compelling narrative to tell a deeper story. We recently finished the Sermon on the Mount and as we think about the Sermon on the Mount, we understand Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived. And the greatest teacher who ever lived taught Peter how to read his Bible. He taught his followers how to read their Bibles. That's there at the end of Luke chapter 24. Sometimes it's known as the Emmaus Road principle. Resurrection Sunday, confused disciples. They know that Jesus died and they don't know why and they feel like it's the end. And the risen Jesus comes to them and leads this Bible study where he points them to

each section of the Bible and says, see, it all speaks about me. It all anticipates my suffering and my resurrection and my glory.

And Jesus has been training his followers to read the Word of God, seeing that all Scripture points to him. And so while Peter and the church are waiting in this waiting phase, Peter is reading his Bible.

And the Lord continues to teach. And he continues to teach him from the book of Psalms. And in this little section, verse 15 to 22, Jesus shows Peter from the book of Psalms, firstly, that Judas, the betrayer, well, his betrayal fulfilled Scripture, and secondly, that Judas, the betrayer, must be replaced. Look at verse 16. Here is Peter standing up and saying to the church brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas.

[12 : 45] And then look at verse 24, said Peter, it is written in the book of Psalms, may his place be deserted, let there be no one to dwell in it, and may another take his place of leadership. So he goes to two Psalms, fairly obscure Psalms, we don't tend to sing them a lot, Psalm 69, Psalm 109, and he says, this speaks to us about the story of Jesus. Now, what are Psalms 69 and 109 about? If you have time, you can read them, you can read them, but there are certain similarities. There is a righteous king, and he's crying out to God because he is facing betrayal by one of his inner circle. He has been showing kindness as the king, but that kindness is being returned with hate and harm and evil in 10.

And in each of the Psalms, there is this recognition that such is the evil, such is the betrayal against God and his king, that judgment is demanded, that this man must be removed from the inner circle, and he must be replaced by another. And as Peter reads his Bible deeply, he understands this reveals the story of Christ Jesus, the king, that Judas was in the inner circle, and he betrayed Jesus, and he has already faced judgment, and now he must be replaced.

Psalm 109 verse 8 must be written, must be fulfilled. May another take his place of leadership. And we'll think about that in a moment. But for now, just recognize this principle, that the first church is absolutely governed by God's word. The Bible is setting their direction.

The Bible will tell them who their leaders should be. So they are reading the Bible that Jesus read, and they're reading the Bible the way Jesus taught them to read it. Now, that's really significant for you and me today. This absolutely sets some unchanging priorities for us in Beclunion, and should set a priority for every local church. We will always read the Bible.

That's a guarantee. If you come to this church, God's word will always be central to our Sundays.

And it will always be central to our discipleship. How will we grow and mature to know God, to know Jesus better, to live for Him? We're going to take our direction from the Bible. We're committed to the fact that the Bible gives us our mission and our message. But more than that, we're committed to reading the Bible in a certain way. We will read the Bible in a Christ-centered way, the way Jesus taught us to.

[15 : 21] So that our preaching and our teaching, our way of discussing the Bible and teaching the Bible, even to our children and to our youth, it will be full of Christ. It should always be focused on Christ as Lord and Savior and as King. And again, if you're new to the city and you're looking around for a church, make sure that's a test that you apply. Will this church help me to see Jesus in the Bible? When I read my Bible, will I see more of Christ? Will I be trained in that?

So we read the Bible, we read the Bible to see Christ, and we read the Bible and we share the Bible's message about Christ with others. That's so important to our life as Christians. And again, if you're not a Christian, we hope and pray that you'll keep coming, because it's a great way to learn about Jesus, to come to a church that teaches the Bible. Because as we hear the Bible, we discover amazing things about Jesus, that He is the eternal Son of God, who in the fullness of time became one of us, became truly human while remaining God. He entered into time and space and history, and He came on a particular mission. He came to fulfill God's law, to live a life of perfect obedience that we fail to live, and then to die under the law as if He was the worst sinner who ever lived. And why did He do that? Because He was willing to bear the penalty for all those He came to save. He came to pay the ransom price, so that we might be set free. And then the same Jesus that died on the cross, He rose again in victory on the third day, giving forgiveness and eternal life and peace with God to everyone who puts their faith in Him. And now, where is Jesus? He's up in heaven, and He's ruling over all things, and one day

He's going to return as King and as Judge. And the key question then for your life and for my life is, what do I make of Jesus as He is revealed in the Bible? How do I become part of this kingdom, the kingdom of God? How do I know that He is for me and not against me? And again, Jesus began His mission very clearly and very simply. He said, here's what we must do. By God's grace, we must repent.

We must turn away from sin, from our old way of living, in order to turn towards God. And we must believe. We must believe that Jesus is my Lord, He's my Savior, that the death He died, He died for my sin. The fact that He rose again, that He's got new life, means if I trust Him, I have new life too. There's no more important message, and that's the message we need to be sharing.

I think it's really good when we can have, as individuals and as a church, an invitation culture. Think about Andrew. Andrew, the disciple, you know, saying to his brother, come and see. Come and see Jesus.

[18:43] He's God's Christ. To be able to say, come and listen. Come to church and you'll hear the Bible being taught. Come around for a coffee and let's open a Bible together. Let's read something about Jesus.

As we think about our family members, our friends, our colleagues, our flatmates. Let's pray for opportunities to invite them, to invite them in, to invite them over, to share Jesus with them.

So his first priority, prayer. Second priority, the Bible and the Word of God. Third priority is that of witness. Verse 21, Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who've been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning with John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.

For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. So we're going to see that the apostles, we get to the book, the apostles are totally committed to the glory of the risen Lord Jesus. Nobody can stop them speaking about Jesus.

They know that he is God's promised Messiah King. And they have this laser-like focus on the glory of God that drives and directs their mission. They know from verse 8, just before Jesus left, he said to them, You'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses.

[20:11] And that directs how they think about themselves and how they organize themselves.

And so Peter speaks to the church and says, Listen, we need to set up another apostle. We need to choose another apostle. We need someone else who's going to bear witness to the glory of Jesus who's now risen from the dead.

And notice the important qualifications. It was necessary to choose someone who'd been with them from the beginning, who'd been with Jesus from the beginning. Not just any old person drawn from the crowd.

It had to be an eyewitness, someone who'd seen Jesus get baptized by John in the Jordan, spirit come down, had to be someone who'd seen Jesus go up to heaven, and who'd seen everything else in between.

So they had to be those who had been with Jesus. And also, to go forward to verse 24, the witnesses have to be chosen by Jesus. Because listen to what happens.

They pray to Jesus. Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen. The eleven apostles, they were told that they had been chosen.

[21:18] And now this twelfth one, Matthias, he also must be chosen by Jesus. And so they pray to Jesus, the one who knows every heart. He's going to direct their decision.

Jesus will have his witnesses in the world. The apostles were first eyewitnesses to his life, his death, his resurrection. They write the New Testament for us. So now we, as Christians, we can live and speak for him.

We pray in his name. We believe the message about Christ. And we live with purpose for his glory. We need to be on witnessing mission.

These are the unchanging priorities that Jesus' church has at this early stage. And we can be certain.

Luke's gospel begins with that. You can be certain of what you've been taught. We can be certain. Jesus wants these priorities as a foundation for this church too. For every church. That means you can be certain, I can be certain that Jesus wants you and me to commit to a life of prayer.

[22:28] To encountering Jesus in the Bible. Of living as a witness to the truth that Jesus forgives and saves and transforms. You can be sure of that. Again, if you've just arrived in the city, let me urge you at the beginning as you're setting your rhythms for life, build your life on this solid

foundation.

Let this be the rhythm that guides you. Find a gospel church with these priorities. And stick and stay and grow. And if this is your church, be certain.

Jesus wants you and I to have these priorities. He wants you and I to share this mission together. So that's the unchanging priorities. Now secondly, very briefly, we're going to think about the unstoppable mission of Jesus.

Jesus. And just before we do that, scientists, total shift here, scientists have long explored the idea that there are cosmic numbers that define our universe.

You know, the story of the universe couldn't be told without certain numbers. And you can read books that mean absolutely nothing to me but mean something to scientific types.

[23 : 37] About universal gravitational constants. Or the speed of light or Planck's constant. And there's these groups of really significant numbers. If you understand them, wow, it makes sense to the world.

My level of numbers and storytelling is more three little pigs. That's where I'm at. But the Bible, it's amazing that the Bible is full of numbers that also tell a story.

And tell a beautiful story. So we get the number three and we get the beauty and the wonder of the idea that our God is three and one. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all truly, fully God.

We get the number seven that speaks to us of God's perfection and God's perfect plans. And today's number is the number 12. We can hear the story of salvation and mission through the number 12.

Look at verse 26. After they cast lots and the lot fell to Matthias, he was added to the 11 apostles.

[24 : 36] So even if we're not very scientific or mathematic, 11 plus 1 is 12. There needs to be 12 apostles.

Why? It's because that number is so central to God's plan of salvation. Salvation through the number 12. Beginning at Genesis 12, which is pure coincidence, there was a man called Abraham. Who had been a pagan worshiping idols, but then he hears God's call, he's saved, and he's given a wonderful promise. Abraham, your family will be blessed and you'll be a blessing to the nations, and especially through one seed in particular.

And then Abraham's grandson, Jacob, he has 12 sons. And those 12 sons become the 12 tribes of Israel. And those 12 tribes of Israel go to the book of Exodus.

They are those who will be rescued from slavery, from the hand, from the land of Pharaoh, so that they could know life with God, so that they could live in God's land.

[25 : 39] And those 12 tribes, they had a mission. Israel, you are to be a light to the nations in the way that they lived under God's rule, under God's laws.

Their life and worship was supposed to be like a giant neon sign saying, this is the way to know God. This is where the true God lives. This is where life with God is to be found. And when Israel was being obedient, all was well and good.

God's kingdom was growing, but often they failed. And the Old Testament finishes with that sense of failure and longing for God to restore Israel.

And then Jesus comes. And Jesus fulfills where Israel fails. He is the light that shines the glory and salvation of God. He is the one who perfectly keeps the law and perfectly satisfies the demand of justice under the law.

And Jesus, what does he do in his mission? From the beginning, he chooses how many disciples? He chooses 12. 12 men who will be with him, who will learn from him, who will then be sent on mission.

[26 : 41] And guess what their mission is? It's to be a light to the nation so that blessing could spread. So think about the significance of Acts chapter 1. It is essential then for these 12 apostles to be established as a sign that God is continuing his mission of building a people for himself through this 12.

In the Old Testament, it was the 12 tribes of Israel. In the New Testament, it's through the apostles and through their work. The church continues.

The story of Israel fulfills God's plan as his people are drawn from all nations. Go to the very end of the Bible. Revelation 21.

What do we find? We find a vision of the new city, the city of God. And there's 12 gates. And those gates represent the 12 tribes of Israel. There's 12 foundation stones.

And those foundation stones represent the 12 apostles. So the people who live with God, the people who always enjoy the glory of Jesus, who know life with Jesus, are those who are built on the message of the apostles, which is about giving glory to Jesus, the risen from the dead Savior. [27 : 56] That's our joy for all eternity. And it's this mission that the apostles are about to begin when the Spirit comes. Fast forward 2,000 or so years, and we recognize this mission of Jesus has been ongoing and is unstoppable.

If we could go to China today or Iran today or Latin America or Nepal, we would discover the church is suffering, but the church is exploding with growth. Because as the church goes as witnesses of Jesus, Jesus works in power.

Spiritually dead people are made alive. Spiritually blind people are made to see. And this, this is why we pray. And this is why we commit to God's Word.

And this is why we commit to mission. As we think about Edinburgh, as we think about our universities and our schools and our workplaces, our neighborhoods, because we want Jesus to be known and worshipped as, for the sake of the glory of Christ Jesus, for the honor of His name, will you and I commit to this mission, certain that Jesus is with us, Jesus is for us, and He will, and He is building His church, just as He promised.