

Our New Church - Power, Grace And Mission

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I recently came across the motto of Clyde Bank, proud past, dynamic future. Proud past, dynamic future. Many of us as Christians have little to be proud about in our past, but by the grace of God, we do have a dynamic future.

Today is special in the history of the Free Church of Scotland. A new congregation is born from the merger of Glasgow City and Partick Free Churches. Both have proud pasts, although we prefer to refer to them as blessed pasts. Glasgow City Free Church is the oldest in Glasgow and will be 200 years old next year. Partick Free Church is 120 years old. For all those years, both Glasgow City and Partick have been blessed by God with gospel proclamation and with faithful ministry. So we look back with thankfulness to God for 325 years of evangelical witness in the city of Glasgow. But today is not about looking backward, but forward. We have a blessed past, but we have a dynamic future.

The best years of our church are not behind us. They are ahead of us. In the grace of God and by the Spirit of Christ, we shall see greater days than we could ever imagine as one church with a highly dynamic gospel future.

[2 : 02] Now, if we look in the New Testament, the church in Antioch was perhaps the most dynamic. In Acts 11 verses 19 through 30, we learn three things about this church. Its birth, life, and mission.

We too are a new church, just like Antioch. This is our first Sunday at worship. We have a blessed past, and we have a dynamic future. May it be as healthy as that of the church in Antioch. First of all, from verse 19 through 21, the birth of our new church. The birth of our new church. Our church is born today, 12th of March, 2023. The church in Antioch was born 2,000 years earlier, but there are many similarities. There always are because history repeats itself. It's what Nate Taylor calls redemptive memory. The history of how God has worked in the past gives us confidence that God will powerfully work among us today and in the future. From these verses, there are three features of the birth of both the church in Antioch and our church today. First, they were born in the providence of God. They were born in the providence of God. The church in Antioch wasn't planted by human design. The apostles in Jerusalem didn't draw up a plan of how to plant a church there. Rather, circumstances forced their hand, or rather, the guiding hand of God was with them. The persecution of Christians arose in Jerusalem, and Christians were scattered over the entire eastern Mediterranean.

The blood of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was the seed of all these churches. Some Christians fled to Antioch in the mid to north of modern-day Syria. Now, the persecution of these Christians was very painful. Being forced from their homes at gunpoint or swordpoint was terrifying, and yet behind it all lay the guiding hand of an all-wise and loving God, whose desire it was that a living community of gospel-thriving Christians should grow in the city of Antioch. The birth of this church was not according to human design. It was entirely down to divine initiative. God seeded this church out of the crucible of trauma, and He did so so that no human being could take the praise for their strategic competence.

Rather, through human weakness, God worked in strength. Think of our congregation today, our one congregation, born in the providence of God.

[5 : 11] Both elements which make up our one church experienced their own troubles. Partick couldn't get its own minister. It was in danger of ceasing to exist. Glasgow City experienced the roof falling down on our building. Isn't it wonderful that we have a stable roof? No human mind designed our union.

It is surely obvious to all of us that we are born in the providence of God. Our past matters, but what really matters is where God has led us to this day when we are born as one church. No human strategy has brought us to this point. It is all of God so that none of us may take the praise for our strategic competence. Rather, through our weakness, God has worked in strength.

Second, our church and the church in Antioch were born in the promise of God, in the promise of God. The church in Antioch, as you can see, was born with the DNA of mission. When Christians arrived in the city, they began to share the good news of Jesus. But as we read in verse 19, they spoke only to Jews.

But then when certain Christians from Cyprus, isn't that a great island, and North Africa, Cyrene arrived, they began to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with Gentiles also. The church in Antioch began to grow, not just from those who had been exiled from Jerusalem, not just from Jewish believers, but from Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ through the witness of those first Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene. The church in Antioch began to be shaped according to the city and society in which it was located. It wasn't a purely Jewish ethnicity.

It contained people from across the entire Roman world, Jews, Gentiles, one in Christ. This was always the shape God intended His church to grow into, unity expressed in diversity, multicultural, shaped like the societies in which we are located.

[7 : 40] In our new church, we have that unity expressed in diversity. We are not all the same. We're from different ethnic groupings. We're from different countries. We weren't all brought up in one cultural expression or into one social class. What unites us is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We would love to be shaped more like the city of Glasgow, but this is the shape God has made us into, and we are glad. His promise to Abraham was that through his seed, Jesus, the whole world will be blessed, and our birth as a new church is one little fulfillment of that promise.

Let's praise God for what today means. We are a new multicultural family with new opportunities to shape our fellowship into one more like the church in Antioch. Born in the providence of God and the promise of God, and third, in the power of God. In verse 21, we read these remarkable words. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. The church was made up of Jewish Christian exiles, but it was soon outnumbered by new Christians. We read of the activity of those first Jewish Christian exiles. In verse 19, we read they were speaking the word. In verse 20, they spoke to, and also they were preaching the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 31] They opened their mouths. They proclaimed the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. Many of those to whom they spoke believed, and a church was planted. Behind it all, however, we read in verse 21, the Lord's hand was with them. The hand of the Lord is his power. The Christians spoke, and God worked in power to turn the hearts of those to whom they spoke to him.

Now, this isn't something which is quite as true of us in our new church. We'd like it to be. We want and pray for God to work in power through the proclamation of the word, so that many, many more people may become Christians. Because the influx of these new Christians into the church in Antioch gave it a vibrancy and excitement, which led it to becoming the model New Testament church. That influx of new Christians isn't quite true of us yet. But remember, today is day one of our new church. There's still time. And we pray, do we not, for our new church to be born in the power of God as his Holy Spirit works in transforming grace among us. We pray for the vibrancy and excitement of that church in Antioch. Psychologists tell us that if a child had a traumatic birth, it can affect their health into adulthood. Remember this. Despite all appearances, we have not been born in trauma, but in the tenderness, wisdom, and love of God.

All the ingredients for healthy gospel growth are present here in our new church, which is one reason why our best days are not behind us, but ahead of us.

Who knows what marvelous, amazing, and powerful things God will do through us. The birth of our new church. Second, from verse 22 through 26, we have the life of our new church. The life of our new church. We have many visitors today. Wonderful. So a visitor comes into our church. Perhaps she's already a Christian. Perhaps not. There are many more things that could be said than what's said in verse 22 to 26. And yet from these verses, we see three things which characterize the day-to-day life of the church in Antioch. Things that that visitor who comes into the church should be able to see.

Faithfulness, teaching, and reputation. Faithfulness, teaching, and reputation. Faithfulness, first of all. When the Jerusalem church, the mother church, heard what was happening in Antioch, it sent

Barnabas, a senior Christian from Cyprus there. He was a Jew, so he may have known some of those who had first been exiled to Antioch. But when he arrived there, he saw that God's grace had been at work, and he was glad.

[12:59] We read about him in verse 23, that he was, verse 24 rather, he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. A faithful man. The church in Antioch could not have had a better minister than Barnabas.

It wasn't just what he did, it was who he was which made the difference. He modeled Christ to this church. Now, of course, we could apply this to how the leadership of our new church must aim to be as faithful as Barnabas, and no doubt that's true. It would be a fitting tribute to any of us as leaders in God's church that it could be said of us, he's a good man. He is full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Please pray for the leadership of our new church, that what was said of Barnabas could be said of us. But what is said of a leadership could also be applied to all of us.

When a visitor walks into our church, the ideal is that she sees a group of Christians who are good people, who are full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. They may not agree with everything we teach, but they're impressed by who we are, or should I say, who God in His grace is making us into.

We're not talking here about our gifts or our abilities. We're talking about our characters. Not about what we do, but about who we are as Christians. Without this solid foundation of Christian character and faithfulness to Christ, whatever else we do as a church will be vain and empty. The life of our new church must be characterized by faithfulness as Christians, just as it was in Antioch.

[15:01] Second, the life of our church, teaching, teaching. Almost the entire activity of Barnabas and then Saul is summed up in this one word, teaching. When Barnabas first reached Antioch, we read, he exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

But then the burden of teaching became too great for Barnabas to manage alone, so he went to Tarsus to look for Saul, who would later be called Paul. We read in verse 26, For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. What a privileged church Antioch was to have both Barnabas and Saul as its ministers. Now these men were unique, but what they preached and taught is the same as that which is preached and taught week by week from this pulpit. Whether a Christian is new or matured in their faith, our greatest need is to be further taught from the Bible about the gospel of Jesus Christ and how that gospel changes everything about us. This is to characterize our church, that we preach and teach the Bible.

We do not speak our own opinions. We preach and teach the solid gospel. We invite people to become Christians, and we help both new and mature Christians to grow in their faith in Jesus. We make no apologies for this because we read it characterized the life of the early church, and by grace a great many people believed.

We will take every opportunity in this church to let God speak to us through his word from this pulpit, in smaller group settings, in personal visitation.

[16:53] If our church is to have a dynamic future, it must be founded for, squared upon the word of God, for only then are we assured the blessing of God, and many shall be added to our number.

And then the third thing about its life is reputation. Reputation. Verse 26. In Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians. The name Christian did not originate in Jerusalem, but in Antioch. They did not call themselves Christians at first. It was what they were called by others. One commented, imagines a discussion between two normal people in Antioch going about their business, and one says to the other, who are these people? And the other says, all these are the people who are always talking about Christ. These are the Christ people. These are the Christians. That same commentator says of them, the Christians did not keep quiet about their faith.

They proclaimed it wherever they went. They were called Christians because they were forever talking about the Lord Jesus. For these new believers in Antioch, sharing their faith was entirely as natural as believing, as breathing rather. It wasn't an optional extra reserved for the talented few. It was something everything in the church did. They did not keep quiet about their faith.

They promoted it wherever they went. So, in their homes and among their friends, they talked about Jesus. In their workplaces, they talked about Jesus. In the marketplaces, where they're buying their goods, they talked about Jesus. When people in our neighborhood outside here talk about our church, is this the impression they get? Oh, these people, they're the ones who are always talking about Christ. Now, they see us coming in and going out of a building once a week, but they don't really know what we believe or why we do it.

We want them to know that we're Christians because we refuse to keep quiet about our faith. We're going to proclaim it in every street, in every workplace, in every marketplace, in every part of our city. You know, we often use in Scotland the phrase, oh, he's got a reputation, in a very negative sense. He's a bit of a Jack the Lad. We long to have a reputation in our city. Oh, these are the people and they're always talking about Christ.

[19 : 46] So, these verses don't say everything that needs to be said about the day-to-day life of the church in Antioch any more than they tell us everything we are to be as the new church here in Crow Road. But, you know, if we get the simple things right, the more complicated things will follow. And our life as a church is to be characterized by faithfulness, teaching, and reputation. So, the birth of our new church, the life of our new church, and then finally, and briefly, the mission of our new church, verses 27 through 30.

I was telling some folk the other day that I recently read a fascinating book called *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*. *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*. It's so tragic, is it not, that so many churches can become ingrown, interested more in themselves than in others? The others perhaps even being the God who calls us out of our comfort zones to serve Him in obeying the Great Commission to make disciples of all the nations.

Antioch can never be accused of being an ingrown church. It existed for others. It would later send Barnabas and Paul, that's two highly gifted ministers, on mission, and it never got them back.

Antioch was a church for the other, just as Christ was always for the other. And as Christians, we are to be for the other. This is our mission as a new church, to diffuse to be ingrown, but rather to be a church for the other. This is what our dynamic church shall look like, which today we're asking everyone here to commit themselves to.

The early church of prophets, we don't have them today in the same way as they did because we have a complete Bible in our hands, but the early church had women and men whom God had gifted with insight as to what would happen in the future. One of them was called Agabus, and having arrived from Jerusalem, he prophesied there'd be a great famine over the entire Roman world.

[22 : 12] The church in Antioch immediately responded by giving practical expression to their faith in Jesus. They determined, each according to their own ability, to send relief to their fellow Christians in Judea.

This is amazing. This idea of sending relief to these Jewish churches in Judea, this is amazing because it teaches us that Gentile Christians from Antioch are now financially supporting Jewish Christians.

The barriers between Jews and Gentiles have been completely broken down through their shared faith in Jesus Christ. You see, the gospel always breaks down barriers. It doesn't create them, it breaks them down.

This is a pattern we see time and again in the New Testament. Gentile churches collecting money for the relief of Jewish churches in Judea. What we're seeing here is a church that exists for others. It was never ingrown from its inception and birth. It was focused on others. Just as Jesus lived and died for others, so the mission of the church in Antioch was the other.

[23 : 23] And it would give practical expression to its faith by sending money and food to hungry Christians in Judea. Tell me, what is our picture, image of a perfect church?

And we say, oh, it's a church that's filled with prayer meetings and accountability groups and sermons and worship services and small groups for discipleship and meetings totally devoted to church affairs.

No, no, and no gain. The church in Antioch is the closest thing to a perfect church in the whole Bible. And although we can be fairly sure it was the most spiritually alive church in the New Testament, we have even more evidence that it expressed its Christian faith not in being turned inward upon itself, but by expressing the love of Christ in practical generosity.

It fed the hungry. Not just in its own church, but in other churches. It engaged in mission. It sent its best ministers on evangelistic journeys where the gospel was proclaimed and churches were planted.

It provided finances for struggling churches in other places. Mission for the church in Antioch wasn't about handing out tracts and knocking on doors, hosting evangelistic services.

[24 : 53] It was about ministering to the practical needs of those who could not support themselves. This is radical mission. Where the needs of others come before our own preferences.

Our own preferences being that we come here to box ourselves away safely from the pain of the world and the need of the society in which we live.

Our new church is one of the wealthiest in our denomination. We're wealthy in terms of our finances, our talents, and our people.

What will we do with that wealth? Surely we'll not use it as an excuse to wring the wagons and hoard, slowly becoming more and more ingrown an Ebenezer Scrooge-type church.

No, if we want to be like the blessed church of Antioch, we'll exist for others. We'll outgrow our preferences. We'll step outside our comfort zones.

[26 : 10] We'll exist not for ourselves, but following the model of the Lord Jesus and of the church in Antioch, we'll exist for others. We'll express the vibrancy of our spiritual faith in Christ in practical ways, as well as investing in the spiritual development, not just of our church, but of our city.

You see, our new church, it does have a blessed past. Oh, it does. But it has an even more dynamic future. We've been born of God.

Surely none of us can doubt that. We're challenged to model our life and mission upon the church in Antioch. The best years of our church aren't behind us.

They're ahead of us. All that remains is to challenge everyone here, myself included, to be committed under God by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit to making that future better than the past.

In what ways, brothers and sisters in Christ, are we committed to doing that here, to making this church have a more dynamic future than ever it had a past?

[27 : 37] Am I, are you in, to making this a dynamic Antioch? like church.

We determine to focus upon the mercy of God.