

The Blessed Church

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[0 : 00] And turn with me to Acts chapter 13 and verses 1 through 3. Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

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. Amen.

Back to the early church. We want to do things the way the early church did them. Such is the call from many churches today who want to get back to the originality and authenticity of the New Testament church and its passion for prayer, evangelism, and social ministry.

There's just so much we admire about the early church. We just want to get back there. To the church where they met daily for prayer and Christians shared all they had with each other.

By doing so, we hope that what was true for them might also become true for us also. That daily, the Lord would add to our number also those who are being saved.

[1 : 46] However, for all that motive is praiseworthy, and it is. The cry of back to the early church is mistaken.

The early church was a jumbled mess of false teaching, ethnic struggles, and divided loyalties.

There were arguments and divisions. There were prima donna preachers and high-profile leaders falling into sin and apostasy. Spend a few weeks in the Philippian, Corinthian, or Galatian churches, and your cry of back to the early church would sound really rather hollow.

It wouldn't be long before you wished you were back in today's church. However, among them all, there is one church which, if I had a time machine, I'd want to be part of.

The church in Antioch. Or rather, more correctly, if there was one New Testament church to which we in Glasgow City Church must aspire, it is to be the church in Antioch.

[3 : 01] For all the confusion which abounded in the early church, the church in Antioch stands head and shoulders above the rest in its variety, in its spirituality, in its generosity.

It's a blessed church to which we in Glasgow City want to aspire, and which our city and our nation desperately needs us to be.

So let's not go back to the church in Antioch in 1st century AD. But let's bring Antioch into the 21st century AD Glasgow.

By the grace of Christ and in the name of our Lord, let's be the kind of blessed church today that Antioch was in its day. There are three features of this church I want to draw your attention to from these verses in Acts 13.

Three features which characterise them and to which we want to aspire as Glasgow City Free Church. In all our visions, in all our plans, in all our ethos, in all our mindset, and all our future.

[4 : 16] Variety, spirituality, and generosity. Variety, spirituality, and generosity.

Variety, first of all. Variety. Variety. In verse 1 we read, Now there were of a church in Antioch prophets and teachers. Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manan, a member of the court of Herod, and Saul.

Now Antioch was the major city of the Roman province of Syria, situated some 500 kilometres north of Jerusalem. Many Jewish Christians had fled to Antioch after the martyrdom of Stephen in Jerusalem.

The church in Antioch, as you can see from the list of its prophets and teachers, was very diverse. It really was the first church where Jewish and Gentile believers worshipped together in unity and harmony.

It was very, very different from many of today's churches. Glasgow always has been, is, and always will be full of many churches.

[5 : 41] Up until recently, and I come from the Highlands, so I've got no axe to grind here. Glasgow had Gaelic churches. Not just Gaelic churches, but churches for Gael's who came from different parts of the Highlands.

Churches for Gaelic-speaking people from Skye, from Sutherland, from Lewis, from the Southern Isles. Church across the road, St. Columbus, was for Gaelic speakers from the Inner Hebrides.

Today, Glasgow has a new variety of ethnic churches. Churches for Christians who come from different parts of the world. African Christians.

African churches for Kenyans, and for Nigerians, and for Congolese, and for Chinese, and more besides. None of these churches for Highlanders, like myself, remain.

None of them. And I predict that in 50 years' time, none of the ethnic churches which are flourishing in Glasgow today will exist either.

[6 : 56] Why do I say that? I say it because none of them display the variety of the Antioch church. Any farmer will tell you that monoculture spells disaster.

That an over-dependence upon one kind of crop will lead to infertility and the degradation of the soil. Any church historian, wisely reading the times over the last hundred years, will tell you that dependence upon one culture will lead to the stagnation and death of the church.

Diversity is a good thing. It's something to be welcomed and encouraged. You don't need farmers to tell you that. You don't need church historians to tell you that. But just look at the ideal of Acts 13, 1 through 3.

The list you see is bracketed by Barnabas and Saul. Barnabas was an ethnic Jew from the island of Cyprus. Great place, Cyprus. Great people come from Cyprus.

Saul was an ethnic Jew from Tarsus. Today's southeastern Turkey. We know enough about them to know that they were very different men who came from very different backgrounds.

[8 : 12] Even though they were both ethnic Jews, Barnabas seemed far more open to new ideas than Saul was. They had different temperaments. You get the idea that Barnabas was forgiving and gentle.

Whereas Saul perhaps had a tendency towards being critical, judgmental and harsh. The point is, they had different personalities.

For our church to be blessed, it must be filled with different personalities. No one personality type should dominate. We need extroverts and introverts.

We need people who are loud and people who are quiet. We need the thinkers and we need the doers. If anything, the church should be the one place in the world where we can be ourselves without trying to be like anyone else.

I don't have to be like you to follow Christ. And you most certainly don't have to be like me. You can be yourself with the personality type God has given you and excel in following Christ.

[9 : 25] Cookie cutter churches where everyone is the same are boring. Really boring. They don't represent the richness of Antioch.

But not only for a church to be blessed, do there need to be different personalities. There also need to be different ethnicities. I've always been fascinated by Simeon's nickname.

He was called Niger. Now you'll know that that's the Latin word for black. Simeon was in all probability a black man. He has a Jewish name.

But he is an African Jew. He was of the soil of a different continent from the others. The only kind of racism we read of in the New Testament is that which existed between Jew and Gentile.

To my knowledge, there was little or no black-white racism at all at the time. It's been a matter of concern to the leaders of this congregation that for some time we have become less ethnically diverse than once we were.

[10 : 35] For example, when I came here, the second language of this congregation was Chinese. We now no longer have any members or adherents of our congregation of Chinese descent.

This is one area we really need to devote ourselves if we want to be the real deal Antioch church of the 21st century. That we reflect the diversity of the city in which we live.

Our elders are all white men. It's not a bad thing in and of itself. But it's a really poor reflection of the ethnic diversity of the vibrant city of Glasgow in which we live.

For a church to be blessed, it needs to be filled with different ethnicities. But not only for a church to be blessed, there needs to be different personalities and different ethnicities.

There also needs to be Christians from different social backgrounds. For example, think of Lucius of Cyrene. Now, Lucius is not a Greek name. It's not a Jewish name.

[11 : 46] It's a Latin name. Cyrene was a Roman colony in the east coast of today's Libya. He may or may not have been Jewish, but most certainly he came from a Roman family.

By contrast, Manan had been a member of the court of Herod the Tetrarch.

He'd been brought up with wealth and status, living in palaces, rubbing shoulders with kings and emperors. He had been brought up not with a Roman mindset like Lucius, but with a Jewish and Greek mindset.

Lucius was a businessman. Manan was a civil servant. We don't know much about their economic or social statuses other than that. But the point is they came from different strata in society.

And for a church to be blessed, it needs people from different classes in society and from different backgrounds. People that work in business, in government, in culture, in sport, in the arts, in education.

[13 : 02] It needs to be made up of people from different ethnic, different economic backgrounds rather. I find it very strange that today's church plants tend to focus on middle to upper class, middle, middle to upper middle class areas.

The church in Antioch was blessed precisely because it did not focus upon one type of person, latte drinking, chino wearing professionals.

The point is this. For a church to be blessed, it must be full of people with different personalities, different ethnicities, and different socio-economic backgrounds.

That is what we must strive to be if we're to bring Antioch into the 21st century. A family where every personality type, every ethnicity, every socio-economic background don't just feel welcome, but belong.

Surely this is something which, as a church, we need to pray for, work toward. A truly blessed church is filled with variety.

[14 : 21] Second, a truly blessed church is filled with spirituality. Spirituality. If anything impresses you about this church, it's their deep spirituality.

From verses 1 through 3, we read of them worshipping the Lord, fasting, and praying. Their devotion to the Lord was total, and through their devotion, they heard the voice of the Lord speaking to them.

The leadership of the church in Antioch was fixed not on ruling and governing, but on praying and fasting. It was not a church court as much as it was a living worship group.

What impresses us is not so much their strategic capability as their spiritual capacity. It would seem to me from verse 2 that it was the leadership of the church which was taking the lead in worship, in fasting, and in prayer.

These were spiritual men whose first priority was their relationship to Christ. When I first came here, the then minister to international students, Finley McKenzie, said to me when we were going for a walk together around Loch Hardinning, he said, The spirituality of a congregation will rarely rise above that of its leadership.

[15 : 53] The spirituality of a congregation will rarely rise above that of its leadership. To put it in a traditional Scottish way, like priest, like people, a blessed church has as its primary goal a close relationship with Christ.

To use a much misunderstood word, it invests in piety. I find it fascinating and not at all worrying that in the name of progress and perhaps even in the name of mission, many of today's churches do not take the lead on worship, prayer, or fasting.

They never talk about fasting at all. Rather, they talk about what kind of coffee is best to serve. They ditch the connegational prayer meeting because it's so yesterday.

And as for Sunday evening worship, they replace it with, well, hospitality at best, nothing at worst. And so the three cardinal marks of the spirituality of the church in Antioch are under-emphasized.

Fasting, that is self-denial. Prayer, that is God-dependence. And worship, that is God-focus. To say that churches like Glasgow City, which include a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening service of worship, and a midweek connegational prayer meeting, are traditional and no longer relevant, is like saying we no longer need to wash our face in the morning and no longer need to put toothpaste on our toothbrushes.

[17 : 32] The thought that they would not pray together corporately never entered the minds of the first Christians in Antioch. The thought that they would spend more time discussing what kind of coffee machine to buy for their church rather than how they can demonstrate their self-denial would never even have registered in their minds.

And the thought of under-emphasizing the public worship of God would have been anathema to them. I'm not saying that our particular expressions of these emphasis are necessarily correct.

I can't prove them from chapter and verse in the Bible, but I reckon that by fair and necessary consequence, they make sense. And by the which, they've done the Reformed Church good for the last 500 years.

What right do we have to pour scorn on the enthusiasm and ingenuity of our forefathers? I happen to believe that a congregational prayer meeting is the most mission-focused, evangelistically empowering, and fellowship holistic way of spending a Wednesday evening.

Not by preference, but by fair and necessary deduction from the Bible, from church history, and sanctified common sense.

[18 : 53] I happen to believe, on the basis of church history, the scriptures, and sanctified common sense, that worshipping God publicly twice on the Lord's Day is better than worshipping Him once on the Lord's Day.

That praising the name of Christ and expounding the gospel is the best way to spend a Sunday evening. I also happen to believe that the church is not a luxury cruise ship fitted with feather pillows and Michelin-starred cooking, but a fishing boat for which to fish for the souls of Glasgow's peoples, a hospital ship to care for the hurting among us, and a warship to wage war against Satan's strongholds in Scotland.

Surely this is a blessed church. No, not, no, never insular inside looking, but a church primarily interested in its relationship with God, and that is what we call spirituality or piety.

And so again, is this not something to pray for? The Glasgow City Free Church would not just be known as a happy family, which we are, but as a holy church.

Not just a great church, which we are, but a graceful church. Third and last characteristic of Antioch as a blessed church was its generosity.

[20 : 31] Generosity. You might think today, for example, you might think, by the way, today I'm ranting. I'm not ranting, I'm just trying to expound the scriptures and apply them in a way that I see fit. Generosity.

Here's the question. What is the measure of a church's success? What is the measure of a church's success? Why, after nearly 2,000 years, do we hold up Antioch as being the ideal, blessed, model church?

If we can talk about such a thing as success in the church, then what's it about the church in Antioch which made it a success? I'd argue it's something quite different from the cultural background in which we are working, especially the cultural background of the evangelical church, and dare I say it, the Reformed church.

The success of a church today is largely measured by how many people gather together to worship.

Success is a numbers game. How many chairs do we need to set up on a Sunday? How many pews can we fill on a Sunday?

[21 : 49] How much money can we bring in in the collection plate? And so when we think of the 20th century, we tend to think of the most successful British churches as being Martin Lloyd-Jones, Westminster Chapel in London in the 1950s.

Thousands would cram into the pews to hear the most wonderful preaching of the gospel. Or in Scottish church terms, St. George's Tron, where in the 1980s, thousands of people would fill that building to hear Eric Alexander's expositions of the scripture.

So wonderful, so beautiful. Not for one second would I ever dream of criticizing the wonderful doctor or Mr. Alexander.

They were by any standard unique. There is no one else like them. However, the model of a church, the model of the strength of a church consisting in how many people gathered together continues to be promoted and continues to be propounded.

But what is it about the church in Antioch that makes it such a success? Surely it was not the number of people gathering together for worship because from the text, we know nothing about that.

[23 : 10] We don't know how many people were gathering for worship in Antioch on the Lord's Day. It would seem that our fascination with statistics, with numbers, with metrics, would be absolutely alien to the Christians at Antioch.

We are numbers junkies. They were sold on another model altogether. Listen carefully. For them, the strength of a church did not consist in how many people it could gather in to meet, but how many people it could send out on mission.

Let me say that again so that we're all crystal clear because it really does form the heart and soul of our vision, our ethos, and everything we are trying to do in Glasgow City Free Church.

The strength of our church does not consist in how many people come and sit in our pews, but in how many people we can send out on mission. Do you notice how in verse 3, after praying and fasting, the church in Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas?

I mean, are they serious? Are they serious? This church has been operational for only a matter of months and they're now sending out their two senior pastors, their teaching elders on mission.

[24 : 40] That's why the church in Antioch was so successful because it never measured success in the size of its congregation, but in the size of its contribution.

never in the size of its congregation, but always in the size of its contribution. Many years ago, the leaders of Glasgow City Free Church took a costly decision.

We resolved to revitalize the congregation of Campbellton Free Church 120, 130 miles away as the crow flies. We sent our assistant minister down there basically full-time.

We sent mission teams. We spent money. We devoted ourselves to the mission of the gospel in Campbellton. And at the time, many people in the congregation here said to us, what's in it for you?

To which the answer came back, of course, nothing. Nothing at all. But look, through our sacrificial efforts, Campbellton Free Church is a thriving witness in Argyle's biggest town.

[25 : 54] Stephen Strong is preaching there today. And all because we took the decision to be generous, not tight-fisted. Or think about today.

We have planted a church in Helensboro. And in so doing, we have depleted our pews of over 20 members and adherents. We have devoted almost all of Phil and Wendy Stogner's time and a fair amount of our money to this effort.

And I wonder if at times some of us ask the question, what's in it for us? To which the straight answer is, nada, nothing. But look again, through our sacrificial efforts there, Hope Community Church Helensboro has been born and is now imminently expecting Duncan and Lydia Murchison to lead that work.

And all because we took the decision to be generous with our resources. for Campbellton, for Helensboro, think Katrina.

Think of many other things that we do. Think about this church in Antioch. It could have hoarded Paul and Barnabas to itself, but think about all the mission opportunities they grasped wherever they went.

[27 : 19] Think of all these New Testament churches planted on Cyprus, the land of my birth, in Asia Minor, today's Turkey, in mainland Europe, because the church took the decision, the costly decision, to be generous with its resources.

And so again I say that's why the church in Antioch was so successful, because it did not measure success in terms of the size of its congregation, but in terms of the size of its contribution.

Too many, way too many evangelical and reformed churches are way too concerned with the number of people sitting in its pews.

They are way too concerned with how many people they can gather in. Antioch was only concerned with how many people it could send out on mission.

It was a generous church. And you know what? It's no coincidence that in Acts 11 verse 26 we read these words in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

[28 : 35] A part of Paul's preaching is recorded for us in Acts chapter 20, especially the words of verse 35. Think about this this afternoon. Paul said these things, in all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must remember the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said it is more blessed to give than to receive.

It is more blessed to give than to receive. Certainly that aspect of being more blessed in giving than in receiving seems to have been lost to the modern evangelical and reformed church.

I want you to get this seared into your consciousness and awareness. Glasgow City Free Church will be successful only in as much as we can give and send not gather and hoard.

We want to open new churches to the glory of God not close others down to make ourselves big. Do not ever believe the criticism that we should be bigger than we are.

Ask rather your critics. How many churches have you planted? How many churches have you revitalized? How many missionaries have you sent out onto the field?

[30 : 02] Don't measure yourselves up against us here in Glasgow City. Measure yourself up against Antioch. In the olden days the back of our denominational magazine the monthly record contained a list of all our congregations together with how much money they sent to central funds.

Many people complained when it was removed. I felt it's lost personally but really and truly I suppose it was only ever used to compare one congregation against another congregation.

For folk in one congregation to look at their numbers and say of a nearby congregation look we're doing better than they are. It became a competition.

if we want truly to get back to the early church then the metrics of our success are never to be found in our accounts our numbers or our statistics but rather in our variety our spirituality and our generosity.

And you know these things can't really be measured by the world's standards at all. They can't be. They depend upon gospel valuations. It is to these values those of a Jesus who died for all kinds of people.

[31 : 26] Who died to reconcile us to God. Who died not for his own benefit but for ours. These are our standards. These are our values to which we as Glasgow City Free Church aspire and will always aspire however much it costs.

Others may aim for size and greatness. We'll aim for Antioch. Let us pray.

Our loving Heavenly Father we thank you for the challenge of this chapter. In a society where we want to accumulate personally, corporately, and ecclesiastically as much as we can.

We thank you that it challenges our value systems and it calls on us not to measure success in terms of how many people sit in our pews.

It calls us to value success in terms of how many people we send out on mission. Lord, for that reason we pray for ourselves.

[32 : 48] Our desire is to be costly servants, sacrificial servants of Christ Jesus, but we can only do that, oh Lord, if we ourselves are strong enough to send.

And that's why we're praying, oh Lord, for more people to come in, not so that we can hoard them, but so that we can equip them and send them out. Our great desire, Lord, isn't to stop when we planted Helensboro, but to plant again and again, to revitalize dying churches, not to shut them down to make ourselves big, but to revitalize them, send out more missionaries onto the mission field, to be a living, growing, sending church.

That's the kind of church that's blessed. May it be, Lord Jesus, glorify yourself in us, we pray. Amen.