

What Do We Have to Offer Scotland?

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Date: 11 January 2026

Preacher: Rev Angus Macrae

[0 : 00] If you're able to turn to the book of Acts and follow in Acts chapter 13, that will be very helpful. I mentioned before we read that this is part of the record of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas recorded in the book of Acts.

And they were initially in the Mediterranean Islands in Cyprus and they left Paphos. And when they were in these islands, Barnabas took the lead.

He was from Cyprus and probably it was natural and more comfortable for him as someone from those islands to be the first to speak and to engage with the people of Cyprus.

But when they left and went to the mainland of Asia Minor to what we would call Turkey today, Paul seemed to step up and to be the leading spokesman of that missionary team of three who arrived there.

Sadly, the team of three soon became a team of two because John Mark bailed out.

[1 : 14] He abandoned his uncle Barnabas and his great friend Paul and went home to Jerusalem. Later on, he would be an effective servant of Christ.

But Paul certainly had his confidence in Mark shaken by that. But the work went on. And so we read that they went on a Sabbath and they had two Sabbath, continuous Sabbaths in the area of Antioch in Pisidia when they were able to speak to the Jewish people and the people who were interested in their faith who gathered with the Jews in the synagogue.

So in the middle of verse 14, Paul is the same rabbinic style.

He's like a rabbi preaching in the synagogue and he's using his body as well as his words to get attention and to speak. And he says in the middle of verse 16, There are lots of speeches in the book of Acts.

Sermons, we might even call them. Or defences before kings and princes and rulers who held the lives of God's servants in their hands.

[3 : 25] The book of Acts is a great encouragement to us in the day that we're living in. Because we are called like Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries, to be on mission, to be those who are excited by the gospel and its power and who want to share it.

And this book of Acts is different really from all the other books in the word of God. There's nothing quite like it in the Old Testament. And the gospels and the letters that make up the rest of the New Testament are different again.

But Acts is a handbook on church life from the first years of the spread of the gospel.

John Calvin spoke about the value of this book to us. And he said that this book, Acts, is the beginning of the reign of Christ and the renewal of the world.

I think that's a beautiful phrase. The story of how God will make the world new is being told in this book of Acts.

[4 : 41] And the story of how Jesus ascended to heaven, seated at the right hand of God, is ruling as king of nations, king of the church. The story of the reign of King Jesus starts in the book of Acts.

He ascends in chapter 1, but he says, wait for the Spirit. And the Spirit comes on the church in power and in the leading and empowering of the Spirit.

Mission takes place. Thousands are saved. Many are called to serve God as missionaries. Peter, in the first 12 chapters, is the main leading apostle.

And most of his ministry is directed to Jerusalem and the Jewish people and Samaria. And then from chapter 13 onwards, the shift and the focus moves.

Peter is still there, but there's more about Paul. And Paul becomes the towering figure in the second half of the book of Acts. And his mission breaks out beyond the Jews to Gentiles and comes to Europe.

[5 : 56] Comes into the Roman Empire and eventually will reach our shores as well. We can learn so much from the first steps that the Lord caused his church to take that will help us to take sensible steps in our day and generation.

So I want to answer a question this morning. And that is, what do we have to offer? What do we have to offer Stornoway? What do we have to offer Lewis?

What do we have to offer Scotland in 2026? 2,000 years after the time of Paul and the apostles.

The scriptures and books like Acts tell us what we have and what we can share.

What we have to offer. So let's look at Paul's approach, his method. Two thoughts this morning about Paul and his offer that will maybe shape us.

And our offer to our nation today. So the first thought this morning is that Paul's first sermon, as the leading apostle to the Gentiles, Paul's first sermon offered facts and fulfillment.

[7 : 20] Facts and fulfillment. What do we have to offer? The same as Paul. We want content in our faith. Content, truth in our message for our town, for our nation, for our generation.

We don't dumb things down. We don't run away from deep truth, from things that will cause our minds to be filled with glory and worship and praise.

But we want to be stretched. And we want our eyes and our hearts to be opened. The synagogue rulers said to Barnabas and to Paul, Do you have a word of exhortation?

That's in verse 15. A paraklesis. A word of encouragement. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews. The whole letter is described in Hebrews 13.2 as a word of exhortation.

A word of encouragement. And it's kind of shorthand for what teaching and preaching and evangelism and disciple making is all about. We take the word of God to mold and shape people.

[8 : 39] We take the message of Jesus, the message of the word Old and New Testament, and it is a word of strengthening. It is a word of encouragement.

It is a word where God comes alongside you and fills you and makes you fruitful. He is the comforter, the paraclete, the paracletos, the encouragement, the exhortation of the word.

It's got to have content. It's got to address the head and the heart. It's got to fill your mind with the truth of the gospel and of Jesus, and that will change your emotional and your will response to these truths.

If we just go for an emotional high, if we just go for comfort, without the content of truth like the cross and the resurrection, people will soon run out of steam.

They will soon be running on empty. But if our hearts are filled with the glorious word and promises of God, the devil can do what he wants.

[10 : 02] The devil can do his worst. We are standing on the rock, and God is our refuge, and God is our strength.

The style of meeting that Paul was in in the synagogue in Antioch, Pisidian Antioch, would be very familiar to us. The way the Jews then worshipped was very like the simple style of Protestant and Reformed worship that we still see practiced around the world today.

There is a call to worship. There is a reading of the scripture. There is a meditation and a teaching from that scripture.

There is a response in songs of praise. There are, the Psalms were prominent in the synagogue worship, as they ought to be prominent in our worship and in our praying as well, shaping the heart.

The liturgy of the Bible becoming the liturgy of the heart. There is confession of sin, and there is the sense that sin is being declared forgiven by the gospel being preached.

[11 : 20] That feels familiar to us, doesn't it? Well, let's never go away from that. Let's never replace that. The ordinary means of grace.

The gathering of God's people on the Lord's Day. The sacraments. What a blessing they are supposed to be to us as we approach them by faith.

Gatherings for prayer. Times to encourage one another. The paraklesis. The exhortation. The encouragement.

When the word gets dug into our hearts. The way we dig our gardens and we feed our plants. We do that spiritually.

When we open the Bible, we let it speak. And we understand its message. And how did Paul go about this in Antioch of Pisidia?

[12 : 19] Well, he gave them fact after fact after fact. Content. Information. He explained the history of salvation. What God did through the centuries for Israel.

And in this, he's actually copying the approach that the apostles took. In the first half of the book of Acts, Peter did the same on the day of Pentecost.

Peter quoted the same Psalms and the same prophecies that Paul would be quoting to his audience a decade or two later. And whether they were speaking to Jews who knew the scriptures, or whether they were building a bridge to non-Jews, Gentiles, who had very little awareness of the scripture.

The facts were the same. The doctrine was the same. The creator who has worked in redeeming, rescuing, saving.

The God of the Exodus. The God of the monarchy under David. The God of the promise to David that there would always be a king on David's throne.

[13:33] These are the things that Peter stressed, that Paul stressed, and that we today need to be aware of. We need to have the same approach.

Stephen, in Acts 7, got martyred for giving a speech to those who took up stones and killed him. But it's the same. It's the history of salvation.

It's facts. Who is God? What has God done? And then drawing conclusions that lead people, challenge people to repent and to believe the gospel.

So we've got facts, but we've also got fulfillment. We've got information, content. This is what God has done.

But one of the things the early church was very aware of was that the story of salvation is a story that proves the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God.

[14:36] that God spoke in Isaiah. That God spoke in the book of Psalms, in the second Psalm, in Psalm 16. And then God fulfilled what he said.

The promise was fulfilled. So facts and prophecy fulfilled. I wonder if you like that kind of teaching and if you like that kind of preaching that is rich in Scripture and making connections between Old and New Testament and showing you Jesus from all the Scripture.

The New Testament scholar Don Carson summed up the life of the early church like this. He said, Above all, they preach Jesus, Jesus crucified and risen, Jesus who pours out his spirit, Jesus who inaugurates the kingdom, Jesus who's drawing in Jews and Gentiles alike, Jesus who's transforming men and women, Jesus who's anticipating his own return, Jesus who is already ascended to glory and who will come again.

He is the man who is God, who was promised, and he has come, and crucially, he is an answer to death.

He has been raised from the dead. So our first thought in looking at this passage is what do we have to offer Scotland?

[16:12] What do we have to offer our generation? We offer facts and fulfillment, the truth of the gospel and the fulfillment of prophecy.

But the second thing that Paul's first sermon in Pisidian Antioch offered and that we have to offer is resurrection hope through Jesus.

A huge amount of the New Testament teaching is future focused. It's focused on the return of Jesus. It's focused on the resurrection of the body. And it grounds all of this in the historical fact that Jesus uniquely has been raised from the dead.

Jesus is not just another rabbi. He's not just another teacher. He is the one who has been raised from the dead.

And so as Paul speaks to the people in the synagogue, he says in verse 28 and 29, though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed.

[17:18] And when they'd carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, the tree of curse, and they laid him in a tomb. Verse 30, but God raised him from the dead.

He appeared to many. The witnesses are speaking about it. Verse 32, we bring you the good news, the gospel, that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us in their children by raising Jesus.

And he quotes Psalm 2 and Psalm 6, Isaiah 55 and Psalm 16, you will not let your Holy One see corruption.

The resurrection is a huge deal for Paul and for the early church. And I think when he went to Gentile groups in Athens and in other places, he had the same basic message, same basic approach, whether people knew the storyline of the Old Testament or not, he would speak about

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, his death and resurrection.

And so often, the resurrection hope was where people parted and where people said, we can't accept that, we don't believe that, we don't want to hear this.

[18 : 42] It seemed too incredible to them. let me tell you a little bit about my recent ministry in Inverness and I hope it will encourage you.

One of the opportunities that I have is to get into one of the local high schools, the academy at Milburn. It's a good school and it's a really interesting group of staff and of young people. and yet most of them have no connection with a gospel church. So there are limited ways to get involvement, occasional assemblies, a hot chocolate club at lunchtime that chaplains go and run maybe at Christmas or at Easter that might run a little video or something that we put together that's shown in the morning assembly times, but it's pretty limited.

But occasionally, I'll get asked to meet the first year pupils, go into their classrooms, spend a period or two just answering questions. I have to tell you, I'm amazed at the questions young people have. 2025, 2026, they're not really asking about political stuff. They're not asking about woke stuff.

[20 : 08] They're not asking about gender ID stuff. The young people are asking, why are you a Christian?

Why are you a minister? Is there a heaven? What happens when you die? What is a soul? What's life for?

these are the right questions and they are the questions that people have always been asking and they are the questions that the gospel answers and I suspect that they are the questions that the vast majority of people that you know are asking.

are we spending enough time in the Bible and in prayer to know the answer and be able to give a reason for the hope that is in us?

Are we spending enough time with people who are not yet Christians so that they trust us and know us and will want to come with their question? That's a school and that's a cohort of young people.

[21 : 26] I wouldn't say that they're necessarily unique or unusual but I find it so encouraging. But I also could tell you story after story of people in their twenties who walk in the door of a city centre church full of questions.

And they're not people often who've grown up with a Christian faith. They're often people who have grown up with atheist parents and atheist grandparents and they've gone through a secular education that did not offer them any spiritual challenge or information at all.

And yet they've arrived at 18, they've arrived at 20, 22, 24, and they're saying, what's the point of life? What explains beauty?

What explains the variety of life and beauty? Isn't there a bigger story? Isn't there a deeper purpose? And they're going online and they're going to YouTube and they're going to websites and they're going on TikTok and sometimes they don't find rubbish answers.

By the grace of God, they find a Christian answer. They find something that points them to the Bible. So they go to Amazon and they buy a Bible and they say, let me find a church.

[22 : 52] That's happening in France. It's happening in Portugal. It's happening in Spain. It's happening in England. It's happening in Scotland. It's happening in Canada.

It's amazing. Are we praying that people who are one or two or three generations away from the gospel would be as open as many were in the book of Acts?

To at least hear about the resurrection. To at least hear that there is a savior and that we need a savior. That the universe has a purpose and that there is a king.

Has this got through to your heart? I don't assume that everybody here in Kenneth Street is a Christian. I hope there are many who are not Christians who are here in this gathering.

But I hope the fact that you're here is not just to please a relative or a spouse, but that you're here because you look for truth and you look for meaning.

[24 : 10] You will find it in Jesus Christ. Christ. Paul might not have been an easy man. He lived through much suffering.

He lived through beatings and shipwrecks and all kinds of things that might have made him cynical about people or hardened, but it didn't because the Lord Jesus showed him when he was converted all that was ahead of him and all that he must suffer.

But his calling was go and be my witness. Jesus does the saving. Paul's job, go and be my witness.

That's my job. That's your job. That's the job of the Christian church. Go and be my witness. go and say, there's an answer to death.

There's an answer to the meaning of life. We have a faith in Jesus Christ that is quite different from all other belief systems, quite different from all other faiths.

[25 : 24] If you have Muslim friends, and I hope you do, and I hope you're a good friend to them, at some point, ask them what they believe, and maybe they'll ask you what you believe.

The fundamental difference between the Christian faith and perversions of Christianity and distortions of Christianity in the sects or whatever, and the fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam are the facts that we believe, the fulfillment in Jesus that we believe, and crucially, the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Islam denies that Jesus died on the cross. Do you know that? Islam says that God would never allow a true prophet of God to suffer death by crucifixion.

well, the facts, Old and New Testament, predict it, and it is fulfilled in history, and there is no salvation for the world unless a good and perfect man, a new Adam, suffers and dies in the place of imperfect men and women, and leads a new humanity, back to the tree of life, back to relationship with God, back from death to life.

That's Jesus. Islam says, no, no, he didn't die, there's no death, there's no resurrection, he's just a prophet. Jesus is not just a prophet, he's God in the flesh, who died and defeated death, who died and rose again.

[27 : 32] Other religions will tell you, go and be a better human, go and be a more loving human, go and be nice, go and be forgiving, go and be kind. Well, how are you going to do that?

Because all the religions of the world that tell you to be kind and nice, they don't give you the power, they don't give you the ability to be a better human.

But if you are joined by faith to Jesus, he has defeated sin, he has defeated lies, he has defeated death, and he lives inside of his people.

Don't make the mistake of John Mark, who left the battlefield, left the mission field, and just went home to comfort.

Later, John Mark, thank God, came back to the battle, came back to the mission field, was restored. Paul found him useful later on.

[28 : 39] But look at the world, the way Paul looked at the world. This world belongs to Jesus. Let's go and get it for him.

this town, this island, has a great need. Will they hear from me and you and from the people of God in this island, how much God has done in history, in salvation history, and how much he is doing still.

Verse 30, God raised him from the dead. You're going to know lots of hurting, sad, broken folk in the year that's ahead.

At some point, we have to go beyond just being a nice neighbor, asking how you're doing. If you've got a hope that has an answer to death, you want to share that, and you want other people to have the hope that you have.

The great evangelist Billy Graham was around when the space program was getting going, and satellites were getting launched, and for the first time in the 50s and in the 60s, photographs were being published in newspapers and on television of the whole globe photographed from space for the first time.

[30 : 25] Billy Graham was asked what he made of it all, these photos of the world, and his answer then is one that is very attractive. He said, when I see these pictures of the earth, sitting in the heavens, I want to reach out and grab the world for God.

Have we lost that? Have we lost that sense that this earth belongs to Christ, that the nations belong to him, the Psalm 2, vision of reality, the Psalm 16, vision of reality.

This is my Father's world. This is my Saviour's world. I want to grab it for him so that he will get the glory.

What do we have to offer Scotland? Why are we planting churches in the borders for the first time in a hundred years? churches? Why are we wanting to return to the inner Hebrides that we've left?

Why are we wanting to return to the Clyde Islands that we've left? Why are we wanting to have strong churches in the towns of Fife or of Clackmanonshire or Stirlingshire or the Central Belt, the East Coast?

[32 : 03] Why go back to the northern counties, Caithness and Sutherland, where there's been just a decimation of the gospel? Why?

Because souls are precious and Christ gave us all for them. What do we have to offer Scotland? Facts, truth, sweet doctrine, fulfillment, and resurrection, life, and hope.

There's nothing else that will change our land. Change a government in May might make things better, might make things worse, but it won't save the nation.

A revolution in Iran or a revolution anywhere else on the face of the earth will change some things but it won't change the fundamental.

[33 : 03] But the gospel, Jesus says, Acts 1, 8, you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and to the ends of the earth.

It's still the same. We are sent, we are on mission and it's glorious. May the Lord help you here in Stornoway Free Church and your sister congregations in the town and in the island to see the Lamb of God praised, worshipped, adored, followed and may this be a year of good things and of blessing.

Lord, receive our thanks for this passage and grant that it may be an encouragement to us to pray big prayers, mighty requests to the great God of heaven who can only do great things.

We ask for our nation to be gifted to Jesus. We ask for this community and island to be gifted to Jesus as his reward.

We ask that many will come to know and love and fear the Lord in this generation. We especially remember the young and those who have questions but yet have not received an answer.

[34 : 36] Show us how to be quick and ready and clear with the answer that is in Jesus. And if anyone here today has come to find the answer in recent days, strengthen them to go forward in a life of discipleship and to commit themselves fully to the Lord.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Our closing praise this morning is from the Sing Psalms version of Psalm 96, a great psalm of praise and worship and thanksgiving.

Psalm 96 from verse 7 to the end, the vision of the world belonging to the Lord who is its king. The tune is our guile, Psalm 96 in version A from verse 7, all nations to the Lord as cry, the glory that is due.

We stand and sing. All nations to the Lord as cry, the glory that is due.

Glory and strength ascribe to God and praise his name and you.

[36 : 17] A durnish course with joy and ring and offer him with you.

Worship the Lord in holy clear all earth he poured in power.

! Tell every land the Lord is king, established in the earth And God man of good the Lord will judge the people The sing his truth!

Let him rejoice On earth be glad!

with joy let oceans ring The fields and all in them will shout At water's trees will sing The all will sing before the Lord Who comes to judge the earth He will judge the world in righteousness The people sing The people sing His truth Receive God's blessing

[38 : 36] Lord you are our king hold us in the hollow of your hand and send your blessing upon us and all whom we love the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit the Comforter rest on you and on all God's people everywhere today and forever Amen God