

A Great Church

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[0 : 00] Now, we're going to turn briefly to God's Word, to the chapter that we read in Acts chapter 11.

And the second half of that chapter, 19 through to 30, the second half of that chapter, and we ask the question, what does a great church look like? And we look in the New Testament and we find many churches described for us, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Ephesians, the Philippians, and so on.

And all of them with their strengths, many of them with their weaknesses, like any of us. What does a good church look like? Luke here in the book of Acts stops the narrative, as it were, and tells us, let's focus for a moment on this church in Antioch. And you'll notice there's no epistle to the church in Antioch written by Peter or Paul or anyone else. But rather, this is the church where the outreach to the Gentiles really took off, where it really began. A missional, a missionary-minded church, whatever buzzword or phrase you want to use, this was the place. And it's the place where Paul and Barnabas, after they'd gone away on their first missionary journey and returned, they returned to Antioch. We read that at the end of chapter 14. And there we see they reported all that the Lord had done for them, and they stayed there for some time. So this was clearly their home church, their sending church, however you want to describe it. Now, I'm watching the clock, and I'm seeing that to go through this passage in any great detail is going to be impossible in just 10 or 12 minutes or so. But I do want to simply give to you from this passage a sort of starter for 10, a taster, and I want to give you not 10 points, but 9. Now, don't be afraid, 9 developed points, no way.

But rather 9 bullet points of features of this great church in Antioch. I get quite enthusiastic when I look at this church in Antioch, and I want you to as well. And I'll just be able to mention some of them literally as a bullet point and nothing more. And others, I might say a word or two if time permits. So if we're ready, what is a church? What is a great church? First thing is that it is a community of people, and it's a community of people we see here which, first point, grew out of hardship and persecution. Now, you would need to turn back to Acts chapter 8. Don't do that just now, but in your own time. If you look back at Acts chapter 8, it tells us there after Stephen was the first martyr and had been stoned that there arose a great persecution. And then we come to chapter 11 verse 19, and Luke picks up the story. Those who had been scattered by the persecution, verse 19, in connection with Stephen. They traveled. They traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.

And what we would have read in Acts chapter 8 would be that they preached the word wherever they went. And this church arose here in Antioch, for some of them arrived this far, this 300 miles or so north of Jerusalem. They arrived, and the church was established there because people had been scattered through persecution. And that's often the case in the history of the Christian church, and it flourishes surprisingly, we might think, in times of persecution. That has been true in the history here in Scotland.

[4 : 34] It's been true in the history in many countries of the world in different centuries. It's true today as we see different churches flourishing even in the midst of persecution. Point number one. Point number two, we see here that it is a community of people which spoke to others about the gospel and if we look at verse 20. Here we see that some went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. Central to the life of a church is that it preaches the good news about Jesus. That's true of this church here in Aberdeen.

That's true of so many churches, true Christian churches throughout our land and throughout the world. But it's speaking the good news about the Lord Jesus. It has, what message do we have? The message of good news. We don't have a program. We don't have even a list of activities and so on and so forth.

Rather, we have a piece of news to communicate to people. And they spoke to people about that good news. I have some news to share with you, to tell you. It's not about a denomination. It's not about an organization or an institution. It's about a person. It's good news about what someone, the Lord Jesus Christ, has done.

I was, I'm encouraged to see so many students here this evening. And I was saying to the congregation this morning how I, many years ago, was brought into this congregation through the invitation of another student. And I was, another student, and that student invited me to come. And those students took me into their midst and made me part of their fellowship. And I simply want to encourage you to do exactly the same. Bring your friends. Tell them the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's central to your purpose as a Christian. Why are you here on this earth? God keeps you here.

[7 : 28] God keeps me here to tell others the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ. Feature number three, it's a community adaptable to change. A dangerous statement in some circles, a community adaptable to change because what we see here in that verse that we just read, verse 20, is they began to do something that was new, something that had not been done before. Before, up to that point, they had spoken the word to Jews only. Good historical reasons, perhaps, for that practice. But now, in the New Testament, in the post-Pentecost era, they began to speak the word to the Greeks.

Greeks, a nationality or a group of people sometimes called Hellenists, but a group of people who before, up to that point, had in the whole not been recipients of the gospel. Peter had already experienced something of the opposition that comes to those who initiate any change, and he had experienced that after doing something with Cornelius. Well, here in Antioch, there was something new. Now, sometimes we're afraid of change. We're afraid of change, perhaps, because we like things the way they are. We're afraid of change, perhaps, because we think that if we change anything, we're sort of tampering with the gospel. Not at all. The believers in Antioch recognized that to meet the challenges of the 99 percent of the population of where they were living, who knew nothing about the

Lord Jesus, they had to start telling these people. And that brings us right back to modern-day Scotland, to the 99 percent who are not here in this building or are not tuning in online to hear the gospel.

We need to think of good, God-honoring ways to bring that word to them. The mark of a great church that we see here in Antioch. Feature number four, a community that enjoyed the presence of God.

And you know, we meet here not simply to enjoy one another's company. That may be very nice indeed. But we meet here principally to enjoy the presence of God. We're not a golf club.

[10 : 23] We are here to worship God. And Luke uses a beautiful phrase in verse 21 to describe what he means here.

He says, the Lord's hand was with them at the beginning of verse 21. What a lovely way of describing that God was in their midst, that God was blessing them in what they were doing. The Lord's hand was with them. And that's a prayer for every single Christian. It's a prayer for every single Christian congregation that here in Bonacord, Aberdeen, the Lord's hand will be with us in what we do.

But do notice the order in which Luke gives us this information in verse 21. The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Which comes first, the obedience or the blessing? Because so often we're tempted to wait for the blessing to be poured out.

And Luke here very subtly simply says, the Lord's hand was with them because they were telling others the good news about the Lord Jesus. And then the Lord's blessing will come when you obey. Feature number five, they saw many coming to faith. They saw many coming to faith in this great church. Things were happening in Antioch. We just read it at the end of verse 21. Verse 21b, the end of that verse, a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. They saw growth.

[12 : 19] Now, of course, numbers are not everything. Let's not pretend that it is. But nevertheless, it is a wonderful blessing when we see our churches full. And I know the limits on numbers that we have just now in the current situation. But I'm thinking more long term how we've seen that in past years, how we've seen our churches full. What a wonderful blessing. Some people can remember days of blessing in the past, days of revival, when churches were queuing up. People were queuing

up to get into the churches. I experienced that myself in Latin America, seeing people queuing around the block to get into the door for the next service. What a wonderful blessing when we can say in a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Feature number six, for my time is running faster than I had hoped.

Feature number six, a community, this church, which submitted to teaching. Feature number six, which submitted to teaching.

When the church in Jerusalem heard what was happening in Antioch, they dispatched Barnabas. You better get up there and see what's going on. They're spreading the news amongst the Greeks. Now Barnabas came, and verse 22, 23, when he arrived, he saw the evidence of the grace of God. He was glad, and he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was glad. This man, Barnabas, there's so much we could say about Barnabas, but time will not permit. But he exhorted them, and he encouraged them. Barnabas was the encourager in the New Testament. This was his talent. He's described here as a good man, full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. Barnabas, who had sold a property and given the proceeds to the church. This is the one who had welcomed Saul when everybody else was shunning him after a period of persecution, introduced him to the apostles as brother Saul.

This ministry of encouragement was building up the church in Antioch. A ministry of encouragement is what you and I can do. With every word we speak to each other, think of it as a ministry of encouragement. Don't put other people down. Don't nitpick and criticize this, that, or the other. Encourage them. They submitted to Barnabas's encouragement, I'm sure, happily, but they also submitted to Paul's teaching because Barnabas thinks, this church is growing a great number. I need help. So he sends to find Saul of Tarsus, brings him, and Saul comes in and joins in that teaching ministry for at least, it says, a whole year.

[15 : 51] Think of that, sitting under the ministry of Saul and Barnabas, night after night after night, week after week, submitting to that teaching. Now we sit under teaching. You have wonderful teaching, week by week, and the question is, do you submit to it? Because a preacher may preach, and unless you have that open and receptive heart, then what good is it doing? We need the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and to make us receptive, because being taught involves much more than just listening.

Feature number seven. I'm almost done. A community of people. A community of people. Let's never confuse the church with a building. We're told in verse 26 that they met with the church. They didn't meet in the church because maybe they didn't have a building. They met with the church. And we, the people, are the church. We're the church gathered today. We are the church dispersed Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday through to the next time that we can gather together. The church is people, and if we remember that, we will avoid many errors that can creep in. Feature number eight. And the last two features really flow naturally if all these other things are in place. Because what we see then is that it's a community that it responded to the needs of others. And you see that in the very last paragraph of chapter 11.

And it's to do with the famine that occurred. And that last paragraph of the chapter 11 tells us about that famine. And the brothers in Antioch, new Christians, mostly Gentile Christians, decided to send help to their brothers in Jerusalem, mostly Jews, overcoming that wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile. And that is broken down in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Be sensitive in a good church to the needs of others. And I can only mention that very rapidly. And finally, feature number nine in this church. It was a church, a community of people committed committed to mission. We've already seen how wholeheartedly they were committed to home mission.

[19 : 01] They were telling the gospel to those around them. But then when you begin to look at the beginning of chapter 13 and those first three verses that we read together, you see here's the beginning of what we would call traditionally foreign mission, overseas, international mission, whatever word you wish to use.

Global mission beginning. Acts chapter 13. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. And then they send them off. And if you know your book of Acts, then you know that what follows is the first missionary journey of Paul. And then the second and then the third. And global mission has begun.

The gospel comes to Europe. And so on. And that international mission came from this great church in Antioch. Sending away what, humanly speaking, we might have said were their best men.

Their leaders. And they said, go. The Holy Spirit is setting you apart for this ministry. Now it's a church, no doubt, that had also faults. Made up of people. So yes, it would have faults.

[20 : 35] But it is a community committed to reaching the lost. Keeping that gospel, that good news about Jesus Christ is a church. And this church here can be like that too. And my church, where I worship weekly, it can be like that too. Let's pray that God Almighty would bless us with that wholehearted commitment individually to serving the Lord Jesus and seeing his church grow. Amen. May he bless his word to us. And apologies for racing through that.