

Sabbatical Thoughts

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[0 : 0 0] I'd just like to share with you a few thoughts relating to my sabbatical for those of you who don't know This is my first Sunday back here in St. Columbus. So I've been away for three months working Taking time off now sabbatical in the church you get I think senior is every seven years nearly every ten seven I think if you're being in a congregation for seven years, you can take three months up to three months Leave of absence, but it's not a holiday. I Haven't add it's not it's not that fun again, but it's not supposed to be a holiday at least it is you're meant to take up some course of study or Do something different in terms of work so because I was Me chairman of our home missions board that decided that I would do work related to that I'm not going to talk about that really, but I am going to talk about just some reflections on the churches I'm not going to mention the churches that I was in but that Over the last three months. I've been in a different church every Sunday. That's a great experience. It's great to be able to do that and probably in many ways I felt that what I was doing was more of a secondment than that than a sabbatical but over the three months I probably visited or at least was in contact with at least 25 free churches and

At least 10 other churches from other denominations and mainly in Edinburgh because when I was in Edinburgh It was in other churches. I was going When I was away from Edward it tended to be free churches because I was visiting churches related to the work of home missions that I was doing and You might think well big deal. So what?

What's the point? What's so important about that? Well, and not very much really in terms of my experience but I think we should have a degree of care and interest in What might come out of that because we all belong to the kingdom of God, you know, whether we are in Saint Columbus here or whether It's part of the gospel partnerships in the city or whether it's part of the free church elsewhere We all belong to the kingdom of God and even the very small flavor of that The visiting other churches gives Reminds us that we are citizens of a of the kingdom of God. We're not just Parochial we're not just free church. We're not just insular or shouldn't be in our thinking and We have a great calling of which we share with All these churches and many many more besides they are our family We can learn from them. I hope sometimes they can learn from us also But it is good to do that and it gives us a wider vision of the work of the kingdom of God and that's very significant But what I want to do is I just want to say a few things positively About the visits that I had to churches and a few things that were negative about these visits and maybe reflect on that for ourselves And then look at we just wanted to at points of of the early church in acts that's mentioned in acts to that Can focus what we're to be as a church as well Well, who is positive about these three months of visiting other churches? Well, one of the positive things was the change Just from the week-to-week pressure of having to prepare Cermons every week before Friday lunchtime and Adding to that the pastoral burdens of the congregation. It was it was nice. It was good to be To have a change from that it changes a good thing And I was also obviously really good for me to see the congregation flourishing when I was away that Recognizing that you know the work of God goes on absolutely and completely whether we're here or not life goes on And it's good to do that and change is good to enable us to do that It helps us to recalibrate our lives a little bit because we can get into a real rut So it's a good thing to change It's a good thing to experience change and the good thing to undergo change sometimes we're afraid of it in my case It was only a temporary three-month thing. I knew I was going back to something But for all of us changes a good thing because it challenges us as to where our foundations are and our roots are and what we're relying on Depending on in our lives. So positively change was good Also a positive thing was the encouragement that I had from visiting many churches and seeing that vibrant churches churches where

[4 : 51] There was a sense of God's presence and a sense of God's blessing and God's growth kind of shared the very same characteristics They all shared the same kind of things and God was blessing Whether it was God was blessing that these things were there or these things were there and God was blessing that well We leave that to God but the centrality of the word of God of Christ-centered living and Christ-centered preaching Was evident in the vibrant churches that I visited a focus on prayer a focus on hard work a Focus on everyone being involved not just it being a one-person show from the front a focus on hospitality on being welcoming on being outward-looking People-centered not ritual-centered, you know So that people didn't come in and just go through the motions and go out and you know There could have been elephants in either side of them It wouldn't have mattered but rather than being just ritual-centered going through the motions and coming and going

They were interested in people and people were important in their situations and these that was an encouragement to see the same kind of things evident Both in the churches that God was blessing and as we see also in the New Testament churches. I Think an encouragement also was the fact that many churches seem to be waking up to the reality of mission and the need for mission And the need for reaching out with the gospel not just being content with doors being open preaching being done life being lived but this recognition that there's lots of people out there and None none of them are coming in and you know We can have the best preaching in the world if the if the pews are empty. It's not doing any good And so there's this recognition that the gospel needs to also go out and that was encouraging and Also encouraging a willingness to adapt and change for the sake of the gospel keeping hold of God's principles and principles and tradition of the truth And I was encouraged by unity and by the love among many denominations among many churches the interests that many churches had in what we do and Just the general sense of unity there was in many places They were all encouraging really encouraging things and I'm sure there was many more encouraging things also Oh or one or two the negative things about being away and doing this kind of thing for three months Well, one of them was being in a different church every week That was quite negative. I found that quite difficult for 12 weeks I missed St. Columbus. I must be among my friends. I must I missed the community I missed the day-to-day life of the congregation the friendships accountability the the acts of service that people are doing and that you hear about and it reminded me that it's a really unhealthy thing to Simply be a Sunday Christian to simply come and go from church without

Recognizing the community of believers that worship together and the lives of people that worship is much more than just a one-hour It's what I would call dialysis Christianity that we just come for our one hour of kind of spiritual dialysis and then go and In some ways it wouldn't matter where you went if that's how you think because you're just going for a fix and coming and leaving But one of the things I really missed was just coming for that out of worship and coming to meet on a Sunday with God our family with the people of God here the ones that I know and love and Meet with so I missed that and I think that's a good thing. I'm glad I did In some places also I found that the churches were kind of just very insular very Disinterested in people being there or people that didn't know being there and not particularly welcoming

I can't think of one church that was really overwhelmingly welcoming in a lot of churches I went and sat in and Took part in the service some people smiled and I left and nobody spoke Nobody welcomed me nobody asked what I was doing there and A common came and went and that was discouraging a kind of a sense of disinterest About other people coming self absorption So that they weren't aware in a sense maybe of what was going on I know the other negative thing that I felt was in many places in some places anyway a real lack of enthusiasm For the word people were you know didn't see I play I am a terrible people watcher And I put a lot of store and people's concentration keep their eyes and there seem to be a lot of glazed eyes in church

[10 : 07] Even during the singing you know people miles away you could not engaging not enthusiastic and It looked like and I'm making judgments here. I know it looked like they were simply going through the motions Just there because that's what they do now if I was and I was going into these places often as I do Thinking what if I was an unbeliever?

What if I was coming into church for the first time and in quite a number of places? I would have thought these people aren't really interested in what they're doing and If that's the level of importance of their faith, then I'm not sure if I want that Because they just seemed so kind of rather dull a lot of singing was very joyless and very very poor to be honest it seemed poor anyway and It

didn't seem like it was from the heart and it didn't seem personal and it didn't seem an individual Coming together of people who wanted to praise God and a general kind of lack of enthusiasm And sometimes I express itself in a lack of kind of expectation I don't think they expected to be challenged by God's word or changed by God's word or refreshed by singing with God's people together or Looking for growth it was just very much in a rut and so

It was also therefore not geared for the outsider not geared for someone Like me had I been an unbeliever coming in for the first time Lots of things weren't explained lots of things happened which weren't explained The presumption was that everybody knew now. I'm aware that that is can often be the case with us that We don't account for we don't gear up to people coming in who might not know anything About what we do We we open look look at Luke's gospel or look at Mark's gospel And we don't maybe explain whether that's in the older New Testament what the older New Testament is and why we sing Why we would pray right the end of the service you all sit down and I walk out Thinking that this morning. Maybe I should explain well. I'm going to go to the door now and You can come if you want or you can sit and speak to one another But you know there's this this great level of presumption all the time that everybody will know what the next move is in church and that could be I think

Sometimes disconcerting for those who would visit for the first time so these are some of the things that I experienced negatively and positively and They are good things to consider for ourselves in our own lives and in our own church And the people we sit beside and the things we do and the things we say the things we take for granted And always being aware not in a hypocritical way Not in order to somehow in a false way impress people but what would people think about our worship if they came in for the first time Does the way I listened?

Is the preparation of my heart is the way I sing does it reflect a living significant relationship? That would be attractive to other people or do they just think well I'm not sure that I would really want to be part of this particular group So there are challenges there for us and I just want to mention just for a few minutes One or two of the important characteristics of the New Testament Prototype church that we have in Acts chapter 2 in a sense the first gathering of believers and I know it's it's it's the very first And sort of indication of what that church was like it wasn't fully formed But in seed form there's one or two things that are very important that might link in with what were positive and negative about my own experience and Which we might consider for ourselves one obviously Significantly and importantly was that they were spirit filled. It was a spirit filled gathering of people verse 4 all of them are filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the spirit enabled them and in

[14:28] There's verse 38 as well We saw that they were a people that who had received the gift when they repented they received the gift of the Holy Spirit I'm going to say a lot more about that next Sunday morning. God willing, but it's It kind of encapsulates all that we are when we gather together and also all that we are when we're apart From formal worship as a community God living in us and among us as a people and That is what sets us apart. It's what makes us different from any other organization or group of people in the world As Christians that we're gathering together and Jesus Christ lives in his spirit and God is with us We're a spirit filled people and that should give us as we worship each time I know it's difficult each time we worship because it's a regular routine We do it every week, but it should be for us as we have a relationship with them

Therefore an ex there should be an expectancy with us. We shouldn't be absolutely bored senseless When we come to God's house and we come together to worship Because I said this morning it should be an ongoing Relationship of spirit filled living we have and that we come to express thankfulness and be spoken to by God to Worship together with God's people just to be encouraged and built up And to be prayerful to be joyful together in our Christian lives Significant and important there should be because we're spirit filled a sense of holiness Longing for the word I Really long for that in my own life more and I also in the congregation Not coming to look at God's word on a Sunday as strangers But coming as those who love his word who are not coming to be and reintroduced to Jesus but to learn more about Jesus having been in fellowship with him and loving and being around his word throughout our lives and that spirit filled

Expression of community means that we are a Christ centered our identity as a people is in Christ as Individuals our identity is in Christ and that means that when we come together our identity is in Christ now that removes a lot of the problems of church life, which is silly battles and personality struggles and Things that happen that we don't like in churches, which is all part of family living and

part of church living But we have this great spirit-filled principle of considering others better than ourselves in the church life and that irons out a great deal of the you know all the Splits in the churches that we know about and we experience and we've had they all they all stem Primarily from small Issues where people have not been able to consider others better

Than themselves and with that spirit film is there's also an eternal perspective an eternal perspective and all that we do a sense of urgency a sense of Recognizing who Christ is and that we are only here for a short time So being spirit-filled like this church, but also being unashamed is Very significant verse 11. We're told that these recent converts Who?

Became believers we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues amazed and perplexed One other what does this mean so the moment the spirit worked in these people?

[18 : 34] They were expressing praise and declaring the wonders of God in an unashamed way in Their lives in their own languages in their own way in a way that was communicative in a way that was natural to them and That's a great thing and that's a great thing for a Christian church to do I Was away on Friday night on Saturday I was away with a men's weekend in King Craig and it was the men's weekend of a pink paintland Church of Scotland where Nick and Martha middle miss go who used to be in the current gazing here and I really enjoyed about yesterday with them was went for a It was a high level walk up the Cairngormson for the old the old guys like me. There was a low level walk Round a lock or something like that. The great thing was that the conversation during that time was really great. It was just Unashamedly Christian and it was unforced. It wasn't it wasn't in any way unnatural and

Just the guys as we were walking along were talking a lot about Jesus Christ and about issues and problems and about struggles and about joys of the Christian life and That was a great thing these people here in Acts 2 had something immediately to share and And they were unashamed of doing so and that's a great thing that sometimes I think we have lost here I think in a lot of the churches that I was in There was the formal worship and then after the formal worship the formal worship could be quite dull and The glazed eyes syndrome, but then the minute the formal worship was finished Everyone was a breezy and bright and talking to one another lots of things to say and Conversation was good and the social intercourse was tremendous No one was talking about Jesus And I wonder sometimes if that's weird a bit like that. We're very formal In our spiritual things and we do our spiritual duties and we worship in our spiritual way. And when it's all over We just we move out of our kind of spiritual vein Now I know that a lot of it's because we're just meeting up and we haven't seen each other And there's lots of things to talk about but also naturally there should be that sense of being unashamed just to share Jesus Christ on a day to day one to one friendly level with each other declaring his the wonders of God in our own Conversation so unashamed. I think that's what we should be as a church, but also We should be provocative We learn from what Peter says to the when he's preaching to the crowd and He says you're the ones who sent him Jesus Christ to the cross Therefore let all as will be assured of this God has made this Jesus whom you crucified

Lord and Christ and when the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other Apostles brothers, what shall we do? So there's a great sense of spiritual provocation in their lives Peter was able to Spiritually provoke them to that place where they Recognized in a conscious stricken way that they needed a savior. I'm not speaking about being annoyingly provocative I'm not speaking about provoking an argument But is our life such and is our understanding and our ability to share the truth such that it will provoke people To ask the same Kind of question. Well, what is it? How can I become a Christian? I?

wonder if any of us have experienced that in our lives somebody when we have respectfully and gently and spiritually had an opportunity To unpack the truth or share our faith or share our testimony and to provoke a response From them about their lives and about the direction of their lives that the response is well, how?

[23 : 08] How is it that I what shall we do? How can I become a Christian? That's a great question. Isn't it to be provoked from someone? through our lives and The challenge is that as a congregation we become that provocative type of people and in a graceful way is what I mean and Therefore this congregation will grow from it will grow from the pew up It's it's not going to grow from the pulpit down It will grow from the pew up as we have provocative Grace filled lives that we are willing to share with those who we know and who we love we long For conversions long for people to ask that question With a sense of God working in their lives. What is it?

What is it about your life or what is it? That I must do to have what you have received and So our lives provoke people towards Christ and that's a wonderful thing so often We can be riddled with guilt because our lives we wonder are provoking people away from Jesus Closing the door to Jesus or They're simply no pathway there whatsoever And lastly In many ways it goes without saying that it was a growing congregation This first and early church in acts was a growing Congregation those accepted his message in verse 41 were baptised about 3000 would added to their number That day and in verse 47 There were people who were praising God with glad and sincere hearts and the Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved and

It's a reminder to us it may not be as dramatic as that but it's a reminder to us what we are is a living organism Living spiritual organism the churches You know the image of scripture the images of scripture are of fruitful Vines of a family growing of a kingdom of new birth of adoption to a family of engrafting of invitations of welcomes That's all the language of the kingdom of God. It's a growing thriving Developing organism And growing is what we do If we stop growing we stop Both individually and as a congregation. That's why it's a challenge sometimes You know in your own Christian life if you're not growing you're not growing If you're not growing You're shrinking spiritually you're you're Retracting away from Christ growing is what we do as Christians

It's what we must do. It's what what we do through forgiveness through grace through learning from our mistakes through repeated returning to Jesus Christ through a practicing his characteristics in our lives Now we know that that can be painful growing can be painful growing pains can be painful growing up can be painful Emotionally and psychologically and socially there can be a lot of pain Matureing is a battle. It's a struggle It's not always easy And often so often in life naturally The older we grow The more we grow up. I think the less we laugh And it's great being in the company of children because they laugh so much and they laugh so freely and so fully and so happily and yet In in our natural lives as we grow up and grow old we would become so much more serious and solemn and we laugh so much less and I think sometimes we apply that or we allow that to happen our Christian lives the more we grow up more we mature the more Solomon serious and miserable that we can become and yet I do think as Christians there's an inverse principle at work Second Corinthians 4 speaks about that. We don't lose heart in our Christian lives because though we are outwardly wasting away yet inwardly We're bringing renewed day by day. So there's an ongoing youthful Joy that remains part of the growing Pleasure of being Christians because Jesus Christ is with us and that makes us different From any other community in the world also, but we are to be a growing both growing

[28 : 24] I hope in numbers Because that means the kingdom is growing people coming in but growing in maturity growing in love for one another growing in service growing in our equipment equipping to live the Christian life growing because Christ is working in this. He's pruning us. He's Developing as he's maturing us and that is a real solemn question for all of us in our lives that the congregation Will continue to be moving forward spiritually moving onward and moving upward with an eternal perspective and I do hope that as we think of Maybe some of the negative things in our own church own congregation We will seek by God's grace to improve these things and the positive things that we'll accentuate them and That we will rely on Christ and that we will maybe learn from other churches positively and negatively and Maybe above all that we'd be aware

Aware of other people. I think that really is as we're aware of Christ in our lives and the compassion and care that he pours on us That we will be aware of others who come in amongst I was in one place. This is one place. I'll mention And the one minister I'll mention a number of weeks ago couple weeks ago. I was in St. Andrews free church and Alster. I was preaching the minister there who's shortly to retire but he was preaching from John 15 about the vine in the branches and He says something very unremarkable. In fact, it was a direct quote from the passage Which was that as the father has loved me so I loved you but he dwell on that for a few moments and Actually, the more you think about that fact That we are loved by Jesus with the same love that the father has for the son It's it's a truly astounding fact and

We spend so much of our time Questioning his love for us questioning the quality of his love That's as divine and as perfect as the love for the father the father has for the son So he loves us and with that love therefore we go and seek to love others in our Christian lives Let's bear heads briefly and pray Lord God hear us and continue with his blesses as a congregation help us to be positively self examining and even as we come up to a time of communion that we would remember to look at our own lives and seek to root out idols and sins that separate us from you as we seek to Celebrate the

Lord's supper, but may we also do that as a community as a people being forgiven forgiving being gracious being Magnanimous Considering others better than ourselves looking out for the outsider thinking about people who are alone

Who maybe don't have the circle of friends that maybe we are used to? give us a Real Christ-like vision in our eyes to look around us in church and to look around in the time of tea and coffee afterwards and when the service is over to watch out for those who May look uneasy or uncomfortable Straight difficult visitors who don't know anyone else and we pray that we would always have a Concern and a love for the outsider to our own congregation to our own family unit as it were and that we would love others With the amazing love that is a gift to us a gift of grace that can transform our lives. So May we remember that this day for Jesus sake. Amen