

Acts 20 – Pastors Conference

I bring you greetings from the South Idaho Pastors Conference. We met at Pastor Henry's Church in Meridian and it was good to get everyone together for some fellowship, to hear some reports from the district, and for some education time. We discussed our presenter's doctoral dissertation, for a handful of hours, on: "Church Administration in the Terms of Parish Structure in the Church Constitution." How's that for a topic? Might seem a little dry but it had some practical and theological applications...

In Acts 20 there is a regional pastor's conference! The Elders, Pastors, of Ephesus come together around Paul. The topic at this conference is not the church constitution, though one could argue a well-written constitution can help in some of the issues brought up about safeguarding the teaching and so on... but the topic is: Paul's farewell address. He is getting older, he is moving on, he will be heading back to Jerusalem, and then, as a prisoner to Rome.

And so what advice does he give these pastors before he leaves?

He begins by looking back on his ministry. He says how he taught boldly and publicly and brought profitable things to the people – things he says testifying to "repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

What does this tell the pastors of Ephesus? What does it tell us? That we as Christians and especially as Called Workers, should be bold and publicly proclaim profitable things. Like 6 steps of self-help to a better life? Or, things testifying toward repentance and faith in Jesus? Yes, we preach Law, the truth of God's word that so often convicts us, let's us know we fall short and need a Savior – that's repentance. And we proclaim Gospel – faith in the Lord Jesus Christ – the Good News that there is a Savior! And he is real and he is for you! God be praised.

Paul looks back on his ministry. Then he turns to the future, he is going to Jerusalem, to live on the golf course in retirement? No, he goes to Jerusalem to continue to work in the harvest fields of the Lord, even as he knows there will be hardship for him there. He is brave to continue to speak the word.

We too have a culture and world that pushes back against God's Word, will we shrink, will we compromise? It's an easy temptation... or will we proclaim God's Word, nevertheless?

Paul, for his account, is going to continue to proclaim. Because he says, "I do not account my life of any value..." We talk about what the Church "needs." We say, "It needs the young families, it needs to be relevant, it needs to more pastors..." Paul says, "It doesn't need me." And if it doesn't need Paul, does it need us? This is Good Shepherd Sunday, our Lord is victorious over the grave and has promised to care for his Church, it will not fail. So no, it doesn't need us or Paul.

"So we are free to go then?" Paul continues, "if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." It doesn't need him, but God has called him, so why would he go anywhere else? Why would he follow anyone else?

And what of us? We are not called in the same way as Paul, as an apostle. But has the Lord's name not been placed on us in baptism? Is the Great Commission for some other Church, just for Ephesus? Or is it from our Risen Savior and to his whole Church, even us? He doesn't need you, but he's called you to your course. May we be faithful in it, as Paul encourages the Pastors of Ephesus to be.

Paul continues, he tells them of how he preached all he knew. He wasn't holding back some secret knowledge, like some cult or conclave. He says "you pastors of Ephesus are equipped with

the council of God.” Go share it. He says the Holy Spirit has called them and made them overseers, pastors, in the Church, of which God obtained with His blood. Which is to say that it is God’s Church not their Church, and that the Holy Spirit has placed them in it. They are not there by their own machinations or determination. No, they are there by God’s Work and Will. And so may their work be done according to God’s Work and Will, not theirs. May He likewise guide us, his people called and purchased in his blood!

One of those tasks that he specifically points out to them is to be on the lookout for the wolves. Wolves will arise from among their own selves. Is this the Ephesians? Is this from among the Pastors? Men will speak twisted things, thinking the Church needs them, thinking they own the Church, thinking they are overseers by their own work and right. These will speak twisted things. We can probably call to mind any number of false gospels and prosperity gospels...

What is the antidote to this then? “Therefore be alert,” so keep watch, “remembering for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.” How did Paul deal with wolves? He admonished (that’s telling people what they don’t want to hear) but he did it with tears. With caring. With love? Sounds a lot like what Paul says elsewhere, “to speak the truth in love.”

What is true and what is twisted and how can we know? How can one judge if something is twisted, if they don’t have something straight to compare it to? So Paul points the pastors to something straight, a rule and norm (that’s a decent constitutional phrase by the way) of God’s Word.

“Keep the Word, work diligently,” Paul adds, as he closes our text once more recounting his ministry. That it may be an example for the pastors. To give rather than receive.

Let's review: Paul ministered humbly and faithfully, "so you do the same pastors of Ephesus."

Paul will receive hardships and persecutions, "you likely will too pastors of Ephesus." Paul's life is of no account and the Church doesn't need him, "or you, pastors of Ephesus." "Be on the lookout because you are going to have to fight wolves, pastors of Ephesus. And while you do all this you shouldn't covet money and, in fact, you should give more than receive!"

Anyone want to be a pastor in Ephesus? Maybe it's easier to talk about constitutions afterall!

Lowliness, hardships, divisions... give, give, give...

And while yes, Paul is talking to pastors here, but, hey it's mothers day, moms, dads, friends, neighbors, coworkers, children, church volunteers... ever feel like you give and you give and you give and "it sure would be nice to get a thank you now and again", and "why is it always so difficult?" And we feel guilty saying no, and we get roped into these things and "what does it all matter for anyway..." Ever thought anything like that? Why should we continue to give when we are so tired, when it doesn't seem to matter...?

I think we first must remember who it is telling us to give. Paul says that's *from the Lord*. And it would be pretty special for someone who's never given anyone a dime or a minute of their time to go around telling people they have to give. But is that Jesus? Or does he know a thing or two about giving?

Does he know not everyone appreciates it? Oh, he knows that well. Betrayed and abandoned and laughed at. Does he know it hurts? As he is whipped and pierced. Does he know it so often isn't fair? As he gives to unworthy, ungrateful, sinners like us? Does he know it seems so meaningless? Vanity of vanities we live we die... he dies. Yes, our Lord knows a thing or two about giving. He gave his all for us.

And in him, may we begin to see that it does matter. Not that our giving earns us something before God, no, but because He has worked to bring all things to a new day- we see a picture of that new day in Revelation don't we! Are you going to be in the complaint line there? Or will you praise the name of the Lamb who gave his all for you? And until that day he continues to work, as Paul mentions so many times, to strengthen, to call, to admonish when we screw up, to forgive when we screw up. To refresh.

Paul gives this advice to the pastors of Ephesus not because he is ignorant of their task and calling, but precisely *because* he knows what they endure. So he tells them to be humble servants, to rest a little knowing the Church doesn't need them but has a risen Savior and the Holy Spirit to do the heavy lifting. He tells them to keep watch for wolves and that hard times will come, but they are commended to God and they have his Word. They are well equipped to fight the good fight.

And so are we. We have constitutions, budgets, buildings, and busy-ness and we pray these tools would help us to give, to give the gifts of God to those in our midst according to God's Word, who again, has called us and sends us. That more and more might receive his goodness and gifts. And that's hard to track, how do we measure success in that? But God has promised he will work through his Church, through a pharisee Paul, through sinful pastors at Ephesus, through us... and we simply can't calculate how the seeds of the Gospel by the Spirit will grow.

But can we rest a little? Because the growth is given by God. And he knows what he is doing. And if you look at the news, or inside and you doubt that... Recall: The greatest giver ever, God, has given us his Son. The greatest victory ever is sure and certain in the Resurrection.

There is a victory. And it is given to you. So can we go forth with courage? Can we go forth following the straight and sure word of God? Can we go forth knowing that the Good Shepherd continues to watch over us? Yes, yes, and yes!

May the Lord bless us. May the teaching be profitable, may his word guide us in the law in the Gospel. May we rest knowing we have received so much from him and that he still continues to give. God be praised. Amen.