

Truth for Today

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Paul's Farewell Address: The Whole Counsel of God – Acts 20:27

In Acts 20, as Paul was hurrying to get to Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost, he sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus. What he said to them from 20:18 is a beautiful description of the service of a great man of God. He reminded the elders of his consistent manner of life and the humility which characterised the way he served the Lord Jesus. He reminded them of the tenderness of his heart, the tears he had shed and the suffering he had endured. Most of all, he reminded them of the way he had completely dedicated himself to building up the Church at Ephesus. He had, "kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it...publicly and from house to house" (verse 20). He "did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (verse 31). He had shown them "in every way, by labouring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (verse 35).

His words are all the more powerful because the Holy Spirit had revealed that imprisonment and tribulations awaited him at Jerusalem. But Paul refused to protect himself. He was ready to finish his service with joy and complete the ministry he had received from the Lord Jesus. He had faithfully preached the Gospel of the grace of God and was innocent of the blood of all men. That is, he had fulfilled his responsibility to declare God's way of salvation and now the responsibility to respond to it lay with those who had heard his message. He had never hidden the Gospel he had been called to preach.

Then he adds, "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

The way Paul had wholly given himself to the work of the Gospel and the ministry of God's word fits perfectly with the subject of the whole counsel of God that we are looking at this morning.

I remember a lady who made the best potted-meat for miles around. Another lady asked her for the recipe but she refused to share it. And as far as I know she jealously guarded the recipe to the end of her life. Another old lady used to make the best treacle toffee I have tasted and freely passed her recipe without being asked. A lot more people enjoyed the treacle toffee, and still do, than ever did the potted meat! If Paul had made treacle toffee, I suspect a lot of Ephesians would have put on weight!

But it was spiritual food Paul was interested in and, at the end of his address to the elders, he said, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

The one who had once given himself entirely to the destruction of the church now gave himself entirely to the service of Christ and the building of His church. He worked tirelessly to see people both saved and sanctified. And the inspiration for this selfless service was the Lord Himself. In Paul's own words he describes the grace of the Lord Jesus, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

At the end of this address, Paul kneels and prays with the elders before bidding them a final farewell. And, as they accompanied him to the ship, they knew they would never see him again.

But Paul's sufferings and imprisonment did not hinder the progress of God's word. In Acts 9:15, the Lord described Paul as "a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." In fulfilment of this prophecy, Paul had declared the whole counsel of God amongst the churches he had built up, and he had witnessed to Jews, Gentiles and kings. In his spoken ministry Paul had reached thousands of people. It is nevertheless remarkable that his imprisonment did not confine the word of God but became the means by which the whole counsel of God would reach the millions who have read the Bible.

“The whole counsel of God” can also be translated as “the whole purpose of God.” This a vast subject but perhaps there is no better place to discover some of its content than in the letter Paul wrote to the Ephesian church. In its six chapters, although we will not have time explore all that Paul wrote, we have outlined for us both the majesty of the whole purpose of God and the very practical effect this should have on our lives.

In the Ephesians 1 Paul starts by introducing us to the redemption we have in Christ. He introduces God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ, chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world, loved us through Christ, adopted us into the family of God by Christ, and accepted us on the basis of the person and work of His Son described as the Beloved. And all of this is declared in the first six verses!

These amazing features of the whole counsel of God flow from the pen of the imprisoned apostle with a wonderful passion and power. The whole counsel of God is connected to the will of God mentioned several times. In verse 1 we have the will of God. In verse 5 the good pleasure or the purpose of His will. In verse 9 we have the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure or His purpose. And, in verse 11, we have the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.

All our blessings flow from the purposes of God. The Gospel of salvation, the Holy Spirit of promise, our faith and love, our wisdom and understanding, our calling and our inheritance. Added to this is power of the resurrected Christ living for us in heaven.

Paul hardly stops for breath in showering upon us the greatness of the whole counsel of God centred in Christ who is “far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (1:21-23).

If chapter 1 starts in the “heavenly places in Christ Jesus”, chapter 2 starts at the other extreme. Paul describes the Ephesians as once being “dead in trespasses and sins” (verse 1). Their lives were controlled by satanic power. Satan is described as “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience.” This appears melodramatic language until you return to Acts 19 and discover the evil influences that dominated the Ephesians.

In the most beautiful and powerful way, Paul describes the intervention of God’s rich mercy and great love at the time of our greatest need. “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (4-7).

The whole counsel of God was a plan of intervention, decided by the Godhead in eternity and enacted by Christ in a lost world. By His death and resurrection, Christ deals with what separates man from God – their sin. He is the great Mediator as Paul declares in 1 Timothy 2:5, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.”

In the purpose of God, we are saved through faith, which has its source in God. And, being saved and made a new creation, we are called to live lives worthy of the Saviour who gave Himself for us. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (verses 8-10).

Paul then explains that the whole counsel of God extends beyond personal salvation to the formation of a church made up of Jew and Gentile.

In John 10 Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.” (verses 14-18).

The two sheepfolds Jesus refers to, one Jewish and the other Gentile, would become the one flock – the Church of God. Jesus became our peace reconciling us to God through His death. Remember it was Jew and Gentile who crucified Christ – an apostate Jewish nation and a world Gentile power, the Romans. And it was to the people of the Roman world that the Gospel of peace was first proclaimed and in which the Church of Christ flourished. “And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have

access by one Spirit to the Father” (verses 17-18). So, in the purpose of God, the church was formed by the salvation of Jews and Gentiles. The members of this new body have a living link through the indwelling Spirit of God with the risen Christ and God the Father.

It is remarkable that the persecutor of the church, Saul, was born a Jew but also had Roman citizenship. We see in Paul's writings the majesty of the whole counsel of God from eternity to eternity. And we also see how the same God works out His purposes by transforming a violent zealot into a minister of the Gospel of peace. The God who will make a new heaven and new earth is the same who knows the hairs that fall from our head and keeps our tears in a bottle!

The church is built on Christ Himself and the ministry of the apostles and prophets, “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

In chapter 3 Paul unfolds the mystery of the Church of Christ. The Jews could not accept the idea of Gentiles coming wholesale into the blessing of God. But Paul explains the greatness of the grace of God through Christ – that is that all people everywhere and in all conditions could be brought into eternal blessing through Christ: “it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:5-6).

The whole counsel of God had a humbling effect on the apostle. He knew in his own life, and he had also witnessed in the lives of others the transforming power of the grace of God. He writes, “To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (verse 8).

The whole counsel of God in which we see the nature and character of God in the work of salvation should have a profound and practical effect upon our lives. As in Paul, it should develop in us a spirit of humility and lead us to prayer and praise.

So it is that Paul prays, “For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (verses 14-21).

Paul's desire was that all Christians should be spiritually equipped to experience the fullness of the love and knowledge of God, to serve and worship Him completely.

This practical effect of the whole counsel of God on our lives is explored in more detail in chapter 4. We can never divorce the spiritual teaching we receive from the practical aspects of our lives. Paul consistently taught his fellow Christians the “deep things of God” and, at the same, how to live lives which honoured Christ.

Idolatry in the Old and New Testament was associated with immoral practice. We have grave examples of men in high spiritual positions living immoral lives. In chapter 4 Paul spells out the kind of lives we need to live. He describes it in terms of walking or living worthy of our calling. Those who have been redeemed should be characterised by lowliness, gentleness, patience, love and peace.

To help us in our witness God has provided spiritual gifts given by the resurrected Christ for the building up of His church. In this chapter these are described as men given to the build up the church, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (verses 11-13).

It is the purpose of God that Christians, as members of the body of Christ, should grow and mature in a spirit of mutual love and fellowship. “But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (verses 15-16).

In the whole counsel of God we are to demonstrate the new life we now possess in Christ, “be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness”

(verses 23-24). The indwelling Spirit enables us to do this and we should not hinder His power in us: “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” And we should be marked by the kindness and the forgiveness of Christ, “tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you,” (verse 32).

Chapter 5 demonstrates how, in the purpose of God, we have been made His children, and how we should therefore imitate our Father, “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us” (verses 1-2).

We are also to walk in light, that is, the truth of God. The counsel of God emanates from the character of God who is both light and love, “Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” (verses 8-11).

We are also to walk in wisdom, “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit” (verses 15-18).

And we are to walk in joy, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (verses 19-20).

Paul then turns to human relationships, which in the purpose of God were given to us for our blessing. This is a very important aspect of Paul's unfolding of the counsel of God. We often view relationships purely in terms of our humanity. The great sadness of today's world is how these relationships are being destroyed. This is happening between nations, within our communities and in our personal relationships. But the counsel of God has its source in relationships - Godhead relationships between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God's love is expressed through these relationships. For example, God the Father sent God the Son to be the Saviour of the world. These eternal relationships in the Godhead are the source of our eternal blessing. Within the whole counsel of God was man's new relationship with God on the basis of redemption. We now express the reality of our new relationship with God through our human relationships. As husbands and wives, as parents and children, as employers or employees, we demonstrate the love and grace God. God sanctifies our relationships to do this.

The highest expression of this thought, and the one that most fits with the counsel of God in regard to the church, is marriage. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (verses 25-27).

It was part of the whole counsel of God that through Christ's life, death and resurrection He would form, by the Holy Spirit, His church. He would build His church, made up, in the words of Peter, of living stones. And one day He would present to Himself a perfect church. That day has yet to come. But in the meantime, Paul takes this profound truth described by him as “a great mystery” in verse 32, and applies it to husbands. In effect, he says to husbands, “You show in the way you love and care for your wife the depth of Christ's love for His people.”

The whole counsel of God is based upon the love of God manifested in Christ. This love is the source, direction and fulfilment of the whole counsel of God. It demonstrates the heart of God, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). It is the love we were created to enjoy and redeemed to fully know. It is the love that motivated Paul in his day and should still motivate us today. It is the love that binds the tiniest aspects of God's purpose in my small life with the immensity of the eternal character the whole counsel of God. And, finally, it is the love which demands, in the words of Isaac Watts' hymn, “my soul, my life, my all.”

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