

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Dr. Gordon Hughes

Paul's Farewell Address: The Church of God - Acts 20:28

"Parting is such sweet sorrow" - so Juliet bids farewell to Romeo in Shakespeare's well-known play. For Juliet, the sorrow of parting was tempered by the expectation of meeting her beloved Romeo on the morrow. No such sweetness tempered the sorrow of those Ephesian elders as they bade goodbye to Paul. This farewell scene in Acts 20 must be amongst the most moving in Scripture.

Paul was on his way to Jerusalem taking financial aid from the Gentile churches in Europe for the distressed Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (see Romans 15:25-28). After missionary work in Greece, Paul and his fellow workers took ship, aiming to be in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. The ship would take them close to Ephesus but there was no time left to call there. Landing at Miletus, about 30 miles from Ephesus, Paul sent word to the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him there.

It is clear that the church in Ephesus had a very special place in Paul's affections. Take time after this broadcast to read Acts 19. There you will see that Paul spent more than two years in Ephesus and the regions around. It is unlikely that Paul ever spent so much time with one local church. Ephesus at that time was renowned for its worship of the heathen goddess, Diana. A magnificent temple to Diana stood there and bore eloquent testimony to the power and wealth of this Diana worship. Alongside the immorality associated with that worship, Ephesus was renowned for the magic arts that went on in that city. Yet so mightily did God bless the preaching of the Gospel through Paul, that many turned to Christ. Finding no more use for their books of magic, they brought them before all the people and burned them - one of the most expensive bonfires in history! At that time, the books were worth fifty thousand pieces of silver (see verse 19), about £1,000,000 at today's prices! Little wonder, then, that Paul loved them for their faithfulness and love to Christ.

Paul's address to these Ephesian elders is noteworthy since it is the only record there is in the New Testament of Paul's public preaching to believers. In the book of Acts, there are several records of Paul's preaching to unbelievers. We also have his written letters to Christians. But only here do we have a record of his preaching to Christians. As he came to the end of this preaching, we read: "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more" (verses 36-38).

Even now, removed by nearly 2,000 years from that event, and separated in distance by some 1,600 miles, we cannot but sense the sadness of that occasion.

As events turned out in the will of God, we know that from Jerusalem Paul was taken as a prisoner eventually to Rome and subsequent martyrdom. Paul already had an inkling, by the Holy Spirit, of the fate that awaited him (verse 23). There could be no sweetness either for Paul or for these Ephesian elders in this moment of parting. We can be sure, then, that in these moments of parting, Paul would not waste his words but, rather, pour out from his heart of love all his fears, concerns and hopes for these beloved Ephesian Christians. There would be time only to speak of the most essential things. What was it, then, that he would say to them?

In the previous three broadcasts, we have looked at what he had to say to them about:

- (1) the Gospel of the grace of God
- (2) the kingdom of God and
- (3) the whole counsel of God.

Now we turn to the church of God. It will be helpful to read from Acts 20:28 "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. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. 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."

Paul makes several important statements in verse 28 and we need to look at each of these in turn. “*Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*”. The men whom Paul had summoned to Miletus were those who occupied positions of responsibility in the church there. They did this, not because they had chosen to do this, nor that they were paid to do so, but rather that the Holy Spirit had laid this concern for the people of God upon their hearts. The Greek word ‘*episkopos*’ translated here as ‘overseer’ essentially means ‘to look or watch over’. The same Greek word is translated ‘bishop’ in other parts of our Authorised Version e.g. Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2. The term ‘overseer’ highlights the character of the work these men would undertake i.e. patiently looking out for and helping the flock of God. The term in no way indicates a position of superiority over fellow-believers. Indeed, the Holy Spirit through Peter expressly warns against any such superiority. Peter writes: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). So Paul deliberately tells these Ephesian elders that they are *among* not *over* the flock of God. They would serve in the same spirit as their Master, the Lord Jesus who, at a time when His disciples were arguing amongst themselves as to who was the greatest, had to say to them, “I am among you as the One who serves” (Luke 22:27). Present day bishops need to take note!

But the order of Paul's charge to these Ephesian elders is significant. They were first to take heed to themselves - to their Christian lives, to their walk with the Lord. Only then would they be able to take care of the flock of God. So the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount very tellingly declares, “And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck out of your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye” (Matthew 7:3-5). Only in this way might these overseers be useful servants.

“*Shepherd the flock of God*”, Paul continues. The Greek word for ‘shepherd’ is ‘*poimen*’ and is sometimes translated ‘pastor’. It describes one who tends herds or flocks, not merely one who feeds them. It implies guiding as well as feeding the flock. So the threefold commission of the risen Jesus to His servant Peter was “Feed My lambs...Tend My sheep...Feed My sheep” (John 21:15-19). These Ephesian elders had been well equipped to teach the word of God, for Paul had already said to them, concerning the time he had spent with them earlier in Ephesus, “I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God”. But in addition to their teaching responsibilities, they would have to be on the lookout for the well-being, physical as well as spiritual, of each member of the flock. How desperately the church today needs such pastors!

But however diligently and carefully these Ephesian elders might seek to carry on their care of the flock, they were to remember that it was still “the church of God” - the church did not belong to them! They were among the flock as servants of Christ - it is His church for one very important reason.

So Paul continues, “*which He purchased with His own blood*”. By His death at Calvary, by His blood shed there, Christ has acquired redemption rights over His church. One of the parables of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13 puts it this way: “Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (verses 45-46). Even that picture falls far short of the wonderful reality of Calvary for there the Lord Jesus did far more than selling all that He had - He gave Himself! So Paul would later write from his prison cell in Rome to these beloved Ephesians: “Christ ... loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

Christ's death at Calvary teaches us two important lessons. First of all, it shows our desperate need as sinners before God. As the children's hymn so clearly puts it:

*There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in.*

Not all the animal sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle and then the Temple could take away sins (see Hebrews 10). Only by Christ's blood shed at Calvary could there be a righteous basis whereby a holy God might forgive sins. Apart from that, all of us would have deserved eternal condemnation!

But the death of Christ also demonstrates, in a way in which no other act of God could do, the fullness of God's love. It demonstrates the Father's love in giving Him. So John writes, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...” (John 3:16). As the hymn writer so tellingly puts it:

*How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.*

But that same cross also demonstrates the deep love of Christ for His church. The Lord Jesus was no unwilling victim dragged to the place of sacrifice. No! He gave Himself! Little wonder then that Paul reminds these Ephesian elders that the church of God was purchased "with His own blood".

As we think of our subject for today, 'The church of God', we need to consider four important questions:

1. What is it?
2. When did it begin?
3. What is it for?
4. How am I to behave in it?

What is it?

The Greek word translated 'church' in our English Bible is '*ekklesia*'. It literally means 'called out ones'. It was used amongst the Greeks to describe a body of citizens gathered together to discuss the affairs of state (see Acts 19:39 where it is translated 'assembly'). So the church is described as all those whom God has called out from the world to Himself, those who have come in repentance and faith to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We should note that never in Scripture is the word 'church' used to describe a building, however much we may be inclined in today's world to think in that way. It is always used in Scripture to describe a group of people. We should make sure that our thinking also accords with Scripture!

When did it begin?

When Jesus challenged His disciples to declare who He was, Peter confidently declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God". Jesus then told Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:13-18).

On the rock of Peter's confession of faith, which Christians down through the ages since have affirmed, the Lord Jesus would build His church. That Jesus had to say "I *will* build My church" clearly indicates that that church was not yet in existence. The church is not simply an extension of the nation of Israel from Old Testament days. No! It is a totally new and distinct body, composed only of those who have trusted Christ as their Saviour. It came into being on the Day of Pentecost, seven weeks after that first Easter Sunday when the Lord Jesus, having gone back to heaven, sent down the Holy Spirit to unite His followers in one living organism, the Church, His body (see Acts 2). The Church will continue on earth until the Lord Jesus returns to take her home to be with Himself. Then all believers, the living as well as the dead, will be with Him eternally (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

What is it for?

The Church has a dual role - as worshippers and as witnesses. As Christians, in our relationship to God, we are to be worshippers. The importance of that should not be underestimated. So Jesus said to the woman at Sychar's well, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). You and I, once sinners and far from God, now have the inestimable privilege of drawing near and worshipping the Father and the Son. That worship, begun on earth, will continue throughout eternity (see Revelation 5).

But the Lord Jesus has left us here in this world so that we can be His witnesses. His last words to His disciples as, on the Mount of Olivet, He left them to go back to heaven were, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me..." (Acts 1:8). By the things we say and the things we do, we need to show to the people around us - men and women, boys and girls, who are still dead in their sins - that we belong to Christ. As He has saved us, so He will save all those who come to Him in repentance and faith. Our witness to Him will last only as long as He leaves us here.

How am I to behave in it?

Sadly, in Christendom today, there are a multitude of churches with many different emphases on worship and witness. What is the believer on the Lord Jesus to do? It is important to recognise that God has not left us to our own devices in this matter of church life. Paul's purpose in writing 1 Timothy, his first letter to his young son in the faith, Timothy,

was “so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). Too many today go to a church because what goes on there appeals to them, without giving any thought as to whether what goes on is what Scripture teaches should go on. Our church life and behaviour needs to be solidly based on what the Scripture teaches.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, as well as his first letter to Timothy, provide us with valuable instruction regarding church life. Much of that teaching cuts right across current practice in many churches. Samuel's words to King Saul, after Saul had disobeyed the command of God, are still relevant: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). May the Lord help each one of us, in our day, to be obedient to that same word!

In conclusion, we cannot do better than end with Paul's benediction: “And now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up...” (verse 32).

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