

Priorities for the Church

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Date: 07 July 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, as you know, the general election took place last week, so I'm not going to ask you who you voted for, although that is a common question these days. But when you approach an election, if you're like me, then probably you like to read the policies of the different political parties. You like to see what their priorities are. And then I guess you work on your own wisdom from God, plus your conscience as to who best you should vote for.

Just working out who has the right priorities, who should be elected to government according to who will do what we think would be the best job.

And every party has its own policies. Every party has its own priorities. And so what we're going to do this afternoon is just think about what the priorities are for the church. What should the church be doing? Or to put it another way, what are the principles that apply to the church in every age? And we need to know, because we at CCG are a church, so we need to know what we should be doing as Christians, how we should be. But also, if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then you also need to know what the purpose and job of the church is.

[1 : 13] What does God want the church to be and to do? And it's crucial. So that's what we're going to think about this afternoon. And so in Acts chapter 20, which was just read for us, we see through Paul's teaching and through Paul's example, just what the priorities for the church should be.

Because he outlines the priorities for effective gospel ministry for the church in any age, including today. And so we need to know what they are in order to stick to them.

And so I'm going to divide up our passage just under three headings this afternoon. First, the method, verse 1 to 16. Second, the priorities, verse 17 to 38. And then the power, the method, the priorities, and the power.

So first of all, the method. Chapter 20, you notice, begins with Paul in Ephesus. He's there. He's about to leave. And he had planned to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome.

But he doesn't take a direct route from Ephesus towards Jerusalem and then Rome. Because if you look at a map of Paul's third missionary journey in any Bible, then what you see is that Paul actually goes in the opposite direction of Jerusalem.

[2 : 33] Why does he do this? Well, the answer is encouragement. Verse 1, Paul had just encouraged the disciples in Ephesus. Next, he was going to go around the churches he'd planted and encourage the people at those churches too.

So verse, chapter 20, verse 1. When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia.

Verse 2, he traveled through that area speaking many words of encouragement to the people and finally arrived in Greece. And so encouragement was a priority in Paul's ministry.

He literally went out of his way to encourage other believers. In fact, the same verb, encourage, that's used in those first two verses I just read, is there again in verse 12.

It's translated as comforted. But essentially, encouragement to believers is a feature of these first 12 verses. Paul is all about encouraging the churches and the Christians.

[3 : 41] Everywhere Paul went, he encouraged people. And this was his method, not just of planting churches and reaching new people, but in those churches he planted in order to establish them and strengthen them so that they grew into healthy churches, he went back and he encouraged the people.

So both are necessary, planting, starting new churches, but also establishing churches through encouragement to those who are part of them. There won't be any churches without church planting, but there wouldn't be any churches who survive without encouragement towards maturity

in faith.

And so what does this encouragement look like? Well, it wasn't a kind of, well done, good job, keep going, you're such a great person, you're fantastic. Not that kind of encouragement.

It wasn't about building up individual people, making them feel good about themselves. Because what we read in verse 2 is that Paul spoke many words of encouragement.

So he's essentially encouraging people with the great truth of the gospel. He's reminding people of everything that God has done for them so that they'll be encouraged to keep going and to keep following Jesus.

[4 : 56] Because when we're reminded of all that God has done for us, that should encourage us to keep going. It's the best possible encouragement, being reminded of who we are in Christ.

And so let's make it our aim to speak many words of encouragement to other people. Because as we read the narrative, it's not just encouragement that is part of Paul's method in ministry.

Another part of his method is team ministry. And you saw that in verse 4 to verse 6 where we get this list of names. All people who are involved with Paul in gospel ministry.

So Paul is the main missionary and yet he's got this team of people who are trained and equipped to serve with him. Because if churches are to be planted and believers are to be encouraged and the mission of God is to advance, then it's not going to happen with one person.

It didn't in the New Testament and it doesn't today. Churches need people to serve in ministry.

That's what we see here in the New Testament. People working together, equipped and engaged in ministry.

[6 : 11] And of course that's what we want here at CCG, isn't it? It's not just one man or even a few people, but it's all of us using the gifts that God has given to us to serve him in this place where he has put us.

And there's plenty of opportunity to serve. If you're looking for a way to serve, just ask me afterwards. I'll find something for you to do. So encouragement is a priority in Paul's method.

Team ministry is a priority in Paul's method. And meeting together is also a priority. And we get this in verse 7 to 12.

So in those verses, of course, Eutychus being raised from dead, the dead, is an astounding miracle. But we also learn something about the priorities for the church too.

But first of all, the miracle. So the believers met together and Paul, verse 7, kept talking until midnight. Then verse 9, Paul talked on and on, which has been the practice of preachers basically ever since.

[7 : 18] And could happen today. You never know. So as Paul kept talking on and on and on, Eutychus, he is sitting on the third story and he falls fast asleep.

And he drops down out of the window and dies. It's tragic. But Paul goes downstairs, he throws himself on him and brings him back to life. And it's an amazing miracle.

Interestingly, Eutychus, the name Eutychus means fortunate or lucky. And that's certainly what he was. But there's more to this account than just Eutychus.

Because this is actually the first reference to the church meeting together on a Sunday. Because, verse 7, we read, they came together on the first day of the week.

And so what do they do when they come together? Well, they broke bread, which is presumably a reference not just to eating together, but to celebrating the Lord's Supper together.

[8 : 16] It's also clear that Paul is teaching. That's the emphasis in the text. Verse 7, Paul spoke to the people, kept on talking. And then verse 9, Paul talked on and on.

And so the account begins with Paul teaching late into the night. A boy falls to his death. Paul brings him back to life again. And then what happens next?

Well, Paul gets back to teaching until daybreak. Verse 11. Just imagine what would happen if somebody fell asleep here during one of my sermons.

And that's really hard to imagine, I know. But just imagine somebody did. They keeled over where they're sitting, fell on the ground, and died. What do you think we would do next?

Would everybody just like, okay, yeah, we'll sort them later. Jonathan, just keep preaching. We'll get to the end of the service. We'll sing the final song, say amen, and then we'll carry on.

[9 : 14] I don't think so. I think somebody dying in the middle of a church service would be the end of the church service. Amen. Let's off we go and let's get the medical professionals in. But what's interesting here is, guy dies, and Paul just gets back to teaching.

And the people just seem to get back to listening. And it's all recorded in such a matter-of-a-fact way. Because it's showing the priority of teaching in the church.

And in verse 7 and then in verse 9, the word translated for spoke and then talked means to argue, to reason, to discuss, to instruct.

So this is just not one big all-night-long sermon from Paul. There's more dialogue and discussion involved in what is going on, too.

There's a mixture, teaching and discussion. And whilst the miracle is utterly astounding and amazing, so is the priority of teaching in Paul's ministry.

[10:19] Because it wasn't just Eutychus coming back to life that encouraged or comforted the believers. It was Paul talking to the believers about the good news of Jesus.

And so that leads us to our next point. That's the method. Now we see the priorities in verse 17 to 38. So Paul's method is modeled in his own life and ministry.

And his priorities here are distilled through this speech that he gives to the Ephesian elders. And interestingly, this is the only speech in Acts, I think, that Paul gives to Christians.

And it's certainly the only speech that Paul gives to Christian leaders. Because all of these other speeches in Acts have been evangelistic. So they've been aimed at people who don't believe.

But we would get here in the narrative of Acts as a model with the priorities for how the church should be. So just as Paul's strategy for reaching the lost was evangelism and then church planting, his priorities for the next generation of leaders to establish the church are outlined here.

[11:36] So it's like he gives a training seminar for the elders. Now the word for elders, verse 17, is the word *presbyteros*. So if you're wondering why we're Presbyterian, it's because it's biblical.

Elders, elders, *presbyteros* means a plurality of elders leading the church. Paul also uses another word, verse 28, translated as overseers.

But he's essentially referring to the same group of people, to the church leaders. He's saying this is how you should be. These are your priorities. And he uses his own example to teach them.

Verse 18, he says, So he says, And in these verses, verse 17 to 38, his priorities essentially cover three main areas.

Teach the gospel, guard the church, and care for others. So teach the gospel. His top priority was the teaching of the good news of Jesus. Look at verse 20.

[12:54] You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house. So whatever the cultural context, Paul's strategy for planting churches and growing churches is always the same.

It is teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. And don't just think teaching Sunday sermon teaching.

Paul taught publicly, of course, in synagogues, in the public square.

But he also says he taught in house to house. So he taught privately. He taught people in smaller groups. But essentially, his whole ministry revolved around the ministry of the word.

The ministry of the word of God. In fact, Paul refers to his proclamation ministry by using four words in the original Greek, which are translated into six words in English.

So if you look down, these words are preach, verse 20. Taught, verse 20. Declared, verse 21. Testifying, verse 24.

[14:04] Preaching, verse 25. Proclaiming, verse 27. So Paul's priority is clearly preaching, proclaiming, teaching, declaring, testifying to the word of God.

So to sum it up, what did he teach? He tells us, verse 21. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

Repentance and faith sum up what is required to be a Christian. To become a Christian, you need to repent, to turn away from your sin and old way of life.

And then faith is a turning towards Jesus. Turning from sin and turning to Christ and trusting in him. And that's our only hope as human beings.

That's the message of the gospel in a nutshell. Repent and faith. Repentance and faith. And that's the gospel Paul is teaching.

[15:13] But he expands here by saying, and he sums it up in verse 24, as the good news of God's grace. The message of Jesus is the good news of God's grace.

Then verse 25, he sums it up as preaching the kingdom. In other words, the kingdom of God. It's all about Jesus repenting and turning to him in faith.

And then verse 27, he says it's the whole will of God that he wants to proclaim. So Paul's saying he preached everything as he pointed people to Jesus.

And the whole will of God includes all the hard bits and the difficult bits, like preaching on judgment and on hell and on sexual purity. Everything that Paul taught was what he wanted to give people because he needed to teach them the whole will of God.

Even if it's countercultural, even if people don't like it. Because it's through teaching the whole will of God that we grow and mature as whole Christians.

[16:20] It's how unbelievers are converted. And it's how believers continue in the faith. The will of God being taught and proclaimed.

The gospel being the top priority. So that's the first thing, teach the gospel. Connected to this, the next priority is to guard the church. Verse 28 to 31.

And Paul here is warning of the danger the church faces in every age. The danger of false teaching. And why church leaders must be on their guard. So verse 28, he says, Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in amongst you and will not spare the flock.

Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard. Remember that for three years, I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

[17:26] So the Ephesian elders are told to keep watch over themselves. Because if elders can't keep watch over their life and doctrine, then, well, there'll be a hindrance to the church rather than a help.

And notice who the church belongs to in verse 28. It's not my church. It's not your church. It is the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

And so Paul is indicating here this staggering love that Christ has for his people, that God has for his church. That he bought his people with his own blood.

And that's why church leaders must keep watch of God's people. Because they're precious to God. He loves them. And like a flock of sheep, people can be led astray.

And so Paul warns of savage wolves coming into the church seeking to destroy the flock. Now, the wolves are false teachers who, instead of teaching the gospel, they twist and distort it.

[18:39] They're savage and they're dangerous. And it's clear here that they're not always easy to recognize. Because they manage to enter into the flock.

Because wolves don't just come in sheep's clothing. Wolves also come in shepherds' clothing. Paul says, verse 30, So his words here are frightening because Paul knew, get this, that as soon as he left, as soon as the apostle Paul, who'd been teaching the truth, left, savage wolves would soon come in and infiltrate the church.

Not only that, he says they would even arise from within. And of course, the wolves have been around ever since. They will look normal, appear normal.

They'll be nice. They'll sound plausible. They'll seem reasonable. They will be ministers. They will be elders. They will be worship leaders. They will be teachers. They will be writers.

They will be academics. But they will do devastating damage because they distort the truth. And their twisted interpretations of scripture might be presented as being, well, it's just a different viewpoint.

[20:00] Don't listen to what it says in the Bible. We've kind of moved on from that. See it from this perspective instead. But it's just dangerous lies that lead people astray.

And so Paul's saying elders have got to have their wits about them in order to guard God's people from the savage attacks to his church.

And we've seen this happening in our own day, haven't we? Prominent pastors, prominent teachers leading people astray. Denominations rejecting the authority of the Bible.

Elders who perhaps see themselves as evangelical, actually being nothing more than evangelical fish. And it's all played out as Paul predicts.

Don Carson, the biblical commentator, says this about a small Mennonite community. I think it was in Canada. He said, So what he's saying is one generation believes something.

[21:10] The next generation just assumes something. And then the following generation forgets it and denies it. And that's why Paul is saying to these church leaders, you must be vigilant to guard

the church.

Ensuring that people don't drift away from the true gospel to a different gospel. A gospel that suits them. And scratches their back.

And eases their life. Paul's saying don't let false teachers draw people away after them with their lies. So teach the gospel, guard the church, and then care for others.

This is in verse 32 to 35. And this is the final priority in a sense that Paul highlights. And the priority is basically people.

Paul urges the elders to follow his example by helping the weak. Because he says it's more blessed to give than to receive.

[22 : 15] So Paul is a model of generous giving to people who are in need. And of course all leaders should be. We should be hard working to care for the weak and for the needy.

I'm sure you've heard of the Salvation Army. And you've probably heard of General William Booth. Who was the founder of the Salvation Army. Well the story goes near the end of Booth's life.

The Salvation Army in 1910 had a convention. An annual convention. And Booth was so ill that he couldn't get to the convention. And so somebody suggested to him.

Said William you should send a telegram. That can be read at the convention. With the message that you want to give to the Salvation Army. And all the workers.

And of course telegrams. Thing of the past. We send texts today. But telegrams apparently you would charge by the number of words that were in the telegram. And so Booth being the kind of man that he was.

[23 : 18] Didn't want to use too many words. He wanted the money instead to go to people in order for them to be helped. So he decided that he would try and sum up the mission of his life.

And the purpose of the Salvation Army in just one word. And he thought and he thought and wondered what would be the best word to communicate the point of the army.

And the convention. What it was all about. And so when the thousands of delegates came together for the convention. The moderator announced that Booth couldn't be present on that day.

Because of his failing health. But he had sent a telegram. And the telegram was going to be read at the start of the first session. And so the moderator opened his telegram.

And read just one word. And the one word was others. Others. And then it was signed General Booth. You see, care for others.

[24 : 20] Genuine care for others. Is counter-cultural, isn't it? In our society today, we are all about looking after number one. Expressive individualism.

You do you. The focus is all on self. On my rights. On my needs being met. On my desires being fulfilled.

But Paul's saying here, Christ's church has got to operate in a different way. Church leaders are to care for others. And the best way to care for people is to teach the gospel and guard the church.

But he's saying our care should also be practical. It will involve time. And sacrifice. And giving. And service. And so the question is, well, if this is the method and if these are the priorities, then where do we get the power from to live in this kind of way?

Well, Paul tells us in this passage in verse 24 and 32, our third point, the power is the grace of God. And so we've got to stick to the priorities set out by God and emphasized here by Paul.

[25 : 34] Our method should be one of encouragement, of team ministry, of meeting together. Our priorities must be teaching the gospel and guarding the church and caring for others.

But we can't do this in our own strength. And we won't manage just by trying harder. Another power is needed.

And that power, according to Paul, here is the grace of God. Verse 24, he speaks of the good news of God's grace. And then verse 32, the word of his grace.

And so the grace of God is central and it runs through all of these verses, the good news of God's grace. And the word of his grace is the power that is needed to be the church, whether it's in first century Ephesus or 21st century Glasgow.

Paul tells us his chief ambition in life was to testify to the good news of God's grace. And then he commits the Ephesian elders to God and to the word of his grace.

[26 : 41] Because it is the gospel of the grace of God that saves sinners like you and me. It is what establishes and strengthens and grows churches.

And that's why we've got to believe it, to live it out, and then proclaim it to others. We must testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

And it's often thought these days, isn't it, that teaching is such a dry thing, an intellectual thing. It's often so arid. It doesn't really connect with people.

But just see how the grace of God operates here. It's not just about the head. It's also about the heart. Look at verse 36 and 37.

See what the grace of God did to Paul and the elders. When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. Then they all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.

[27 : 44] What grieved the most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship. There cannot be more warmth or love expressed than what we see here in these verses.

And it all flows from the gospel of God's grace as it impacts the lives of those that Paul is with. God's grace is his undeserved kindness to us in Jesus.

And when it sinks into our hearts, it makes us a different person. And we treat other people in a different way. So Jesus is our Savior and our Lord.

He came to give up his life for us by dying in our place for our sin so that we can be saved. And then he rose again from the dead. And one day he'll return as judge.

And this is the gospel that we need to save us. But when it saves us, we still need this gospel to not just be converted, but to continue in the faith, to keep going and being what God wants us to be, whether as an individual or as the church.

[29 : 00] And so it's as we grasp this gospel of grace in a deeper way that we'll have the power to stick to our priorities as an individual Christian or as a church community.

So let's keep the gospel of God's grace front and central in our lives and in our church. Let's pray together.