

The Centrality of the Gospel

Isaiah 52:7–10, Acts 20:13–24

Once again, Paul and his missionary associates are traveling! Our Lord had said, “Go ye *into all the world*, and preach the gospel to every creature.” These busy missionaries had planted churches all over Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece, but there were many unreached towns and villages that needed gospel-preaching churches—a need that remains to this day. Planting faithful churches is the God-ordained means of evangelism. “How ... shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be *sent*?”¹ According to the clear biblical pattern, preachers are sent by the *church*.

Every Thanksgiving, OPC congregations are invited to give to the annual Thank Offering, which goes in its entirety to support Christian education, home missions and foreign missions—key components of the Great Commission. Last week we had a flyer highlighting the work of home missions, that is, the planting of new churches in North America. We were challenged to pray specifically that the Lord would raise up new mission works, church-planting interns and regional home missionaries—men who devote their time to nurture core groups that will develop into new churches where God is worshiped as he has appointed and where the gospel of his grace will be preached week-by-week. The end goal is that the true God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—would be honored and worshiped the world over. We who confess the name of Christ are co-laborers with him in taking the Gospel to the nations. Paul and his missionary team understood this; that is why they were on the road. As we examine our text this morning, let us discern three principles that we as a church can put into practice as we seek to become the church that God would have us to be. First,

1. Intentionality

Notice the words “intending ... intending ... decided” in verses 13–16: “Then we went ahead to the ship and sailed to Assos, there *intending* to take Paul on board; for so he had given orders, *intending* himself to go on foot. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. We sailed from there, and the next day came opposite Chios. The following day we arrived at Samos and stayed at Trogyllium. The next day we came to Miletus. For Paul had *decided* to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.”

The apostle Paul made plans, even though as a mere man he did not have perfect knowledge of the future. This is an example for all of us. The Christian

¹ Rom. 10:14–15

makes plans, despite his not knowing the future. He knows that the future is in God's hands, that God himself is working out all his holy will. Paul will later explain that we are "predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his *own* will."² Though it often appears that his enemies are running roughshod through this world, causing havoc and directing their rage against Christ and his gospel, the Bible teaches that God is in control, working out his eternal plan. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed"—yet God has established his king upon his holy hill of Zion.³ Why does God permit evil? Short answer: so he can be glorified in its ultimate destruction. In the meantime he uses trying circumstances to chasten his people and prod them to call on him for help. Christian, your God is sovereign and in control of all circumstances. As our Confession teaches (summarizing Scripture), at every moment the God of heaven upholds, directs, disposes and governs "all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."⁴

This is a comforting thought to lovers of God. Like the Psalmist, we look up into the heavens and realize the vastness of the created order. "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?"⁵ When we look up into the heavens, we realize our insignificance. Here we are, sons and daughters of Adam, mortals—mere creatures. We realize how small we are. But we have a great God, and *he* is in control! He has given us his great and precious promises. He has promised that he will "build" his church, no matter how much the gates of hell may rage against it.⁶ The Father has said to the Son, "Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool."⁷ At the final day the Lord Jesus will be universally acknowledged as King and will reign forever and ever. His enemies will be cast into hell and those who love him will gaze into his blessed face forever and ever.

Sometimes in this earthly life we experience setbacks; our best-made plans do not always go as smoothly and efficiently as we had hoped. Yet God is able to bring good out of evil. Ultimately, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord! That is God's plan. If you belong to Christ, then you are on the winning side; one day you will hear his words, "Come, ye blessed

² Eph. 1:11

³ Ps. 2:2, 6

⁴ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_05

⁵ Ps. 8:3–4

⁶ Matt. 16:18

⁷ Matt. 22:44, Mark 12:36, Luke 20:43, Heb. 1:13, Heb. 10:13

of my Father, enter into the joy of your Lord.” God tells his people, “I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11).⁸ This is a popular slogan on plaques sold in Christian bookstores. It is positive, reassuring. We should not conclude from this verse that we who trust in God are always and inevitably going to have smooth sailing in this life. Like Paul, we may experience persecution, trouble and setbacks. But we have the scriptural promise that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” It is Christ who gives us the victory!

Paul and his missionary team made plans. He and his associates would separate for the time being. The purpose for the separation is unclear from the text. Perhaps Paul wanted to visit with some Christian brothers along the way, as he made his journey on foot. Or perhaps he yearned for a bit of solitude, so as to meditate and commune with the Lord. In any case, he had “decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.” Pentecost was one of three annual festivals at which all able-bodied male Israelites were to appear before the Lord in Jerusalem. It was a day of rest from regular labors. It commemorated the barley harvest, the end of eating the stored grain from the previous year and the beginning of eating bread made from the new harvest. God had mercifully sustained his people with another harvest; he would continue to provide for them throughout their lives.

Pentecost was the day on which the glorified Christ poured out his Holy Spirit upon his church. Since Paul was under a time constraint, hurrying to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost, he decided he would not visit Ephesus in person but rather call for the elders of the church to come see him. But the point is that Paul and his missionary associates made *plans*. There is nothing unspiritual about making plans. The Christian should not live aimlessly, throwing up his hands in despair and saying, “What’s the use of planning? I have no control anyway.” That is not an attitude of trust in our sovereign God. Paul made plans and worked out his plans. Though we do not have perfect knowledge of our future, we, too, make plans with intentionality.

Christian, what are your intentions? Is it your intention always to serve the Lord with all your heart, mind and strength? The plans we make are tentative, but God’s plan is best; he will ultimately work all things for his own glory. The world will end in the manner and at the time that God determined from eternity past. His kingdom will come and his will will be done, as our Lord taught his church to pray. But consider our second point,

2. Clarity

⁸ ESV; KJV/NKJV have “thoughts I think.”

As the Christian serves God in this world, he needs to have a clear understanding of the Gospel, the good news of Christ and his salvation. Our text shows that clearly. We read that from Miletus Paul “sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them: ‘You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews; how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.’” Note with me some of the outstanding features of the text.

First, it is significant that Paul “called for the *elders* of the church.” “Elders” is plural; biblically, the normal pattern is for a church to have a plurality of elders. There is nothing here that states that the plurality of elders in the church in Ephesus was in any way unique. Indeed, this was the biblical pattern. Consider Hebrews 13:17, “Obey *them* that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for *they* watch for your souls, as *they* that must give account.” Notice the plural pronouns: “them,” “they,” “they.” God’s never obligates us to give unconditional obedience to any single individual except the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. He it is to whom “*all* power”—that is, all authority—“in heaven and on earth” has been given.⁹ At the final day, every human person that has ever lived will be judged according to whether or not he or she obeyed Christ, the Son of God. This is a blessed doctrine to the saints, who long to see the whole world bow in humble submission to Jesus Christ. As our Confession of Faith, summarizing Scripture, so eloquently phrases it, “God alone is Lord of the conscience.”¹⁰ No one else is—not your father or your mother, husband or wife, teacher, pastor, boss, monarch, or any civil magistrate. Children are to “obey their parents *in the Lord*,” that is, as their commands and directives are in accordance with Scripture. Likewise, the civil magistrate has authority to require obedience to the laws of the commonwealth that are in accordance with God’s holy law—but not if they contravene it.

Some churches do not have a plurality of elders but require obedience to a single pastor. The church members are required to obey whatever the pastor demands: “It’s my way or the highway!” This is unscriptural. The *only* person to whom the Christian owes unconditional obedience is the Lord Jesus. No Christian has the right to disagree with Christ on any matter. Note the careful way that Luke the beloved physician, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, expressed it: “He called for the *elders* of the church”: “elders” (plural). The churches planted by the apostles had a plurality of elders. This was for the protection of Christ’s flock; *he* is

⁹ Matt. 28:18

¹⁰ WCF 20.2

the sole “chief shepherd”; his ministers are *undershepherds*.¹¹ They have authority to teach only those things that are taught in the “word of Christ,” the Holy Bible.¹² They do not have authority to formulate extra-biblical doctrines or require practices or ceremonies that have been devised by man, apart from the Word of God. In short, they are to teach “all things” that are taught in God’s Holy Word, and teach *nothing* that is not taught in God’s Word.¹³

It is significant that Paul “taught publicly and from house to house” (v. 20). Here is a plan for discipleship. God blesses his church with ministers of the Word, men who are gifted for ministry and called by the church to serve in holy office. Ephesians 4 teaches that the ascended Christ gave some to be “*pastors and teachers*; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” Pastors are to be ministers of the Word and sacrament. They are not to be disseminators of humanistic advice. They are to apply the Word to the problems and situations faced by their people. They are to teach their people to “[bring] into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ”¹⁴—that is, to think God’s thoughts after him. The Bible speaks authoritatively on ultimate truth and matters of the heart. Whatever the Bible teaches about anything is absolute truth. The Psalmist prays, “Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way.”¹⁵ The Lord Jesus is in full agreement with the Psalmist; remember his authoritative declaration, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). Wherever the minister goes, whether into the pulpit, into a private home, nursing home, hospital, jail, funeral home, or anywhere else, he is to be a minister of the word. He is to know his Bible and be able to relate it to everyday situations—problems, difficulties, temptations. He ought to pray with and for his people and answer their questions, giving them wise spiritual counsel.

Paul bares his heart to the Ephesian elders, telling them, “I kept back nothing that was helpful”—no paywall! The Christian cannot charge for the dissemination of the Gospel. As our Lord directed his apostles, “Freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). The Gospel is not an infomercial which teases, giving out bits of useful information while promising the full story only to those who keep watching till the end and pay by credit card. No! Paul says, “I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is the heart of the gospel message:

¹¹ 1 Pet. 5:1–4

¹² Col. 3:16

¹³ Matt. 28:20

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 10:5

¹⁵ Ps. 119:128

“repentance” and “faith.” All men are sinners, alienated from the God of heaven. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Savior, the only Mediator between God and men. Salvation is in Christ alone. God requires two things: repentance and faith. Essentially, these are two sides of the same coin. Repentance is a change of mind, a recognition that I am a sinner and have offended a holy God. On the other hand, “faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.”¹⁶ Repentance is a turning away from sin; faith is a turning *toward* Christ. Here is what God demands of every person. “Without faith it is impossible to please him.”¹⁷ Here is the essence of the Gospel. Every Christian should know how to share the Gospel with others. Do you?

The Gospel is good news! Our Old Testament text declares, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings *good news*, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” The phrase “who proclaims salvation”¹⁸ could be rendered “who proclaims *Jesus*.” The name Jesus (יֵשׁוּעַ) is a variant of the word salvation (יְשׁוּעָה). The name Jesus means *salvation*! Similarly, when our text says, “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (יְשׁוּעַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ), it could be translated, “all the ends of the earth shall see the *Jesus* of our God.”¹⁹ This is a prophecy that is fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ!

Here is a terse description of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus: “testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” There is *one* way of salvation; it is adequate for both Jews and Gentiles. Here is the message of the Gospel described with clarity. Thirdly,

3. Sacrifice

Paul announces, “See, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy.” These words were spoken to the elders of the Ephesian church. Imagine how they must have moved Paul’s fellow-elders. They were colleagues in ministry. They had labored together in the Gospel. They had served together, calling Christ’s sheep to himself, but also experiencing persecution at the hand of the Jews. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Paul that chains and tribulations awaited him in Jerusalem, but rather than running away, he presses on courageously. He says that he does not count his life dear to himself. Humans universally exhibit a self-preservation

¹⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism 86, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

¹⁷ Heb. 11:6

¹⁸ מְשַׁמֵּיעַ יְשׁוּעָה

¹⁹ Isa. 52:10

instinct. We instinctively flee from danger. We don't want to be harmed or killed. This is a basic human instinct. This week I saw a story about a couple, both 84 years old, who were at home together when fire broke out. The husband called 911 and opened a door to let firefighters enter. He ran back to get his wife, who used a wheelchair, but she had fallen in the bathroom. They became trapped when the floor began to collapse, and they died together. The dispatcher had told the husband to get out of the house but the man said, "I'm not leaving my wife," and stayed with her until the end.

Ordinarily people run from danger. We instinctively know the value of human life. But the apostle Paul, in spite of being warned that chains and tribulations awaited him in Jerusalem, pressed on. He testified, "I do not count my life dear to myself." He followed in the steps of the Savior, who "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"²⁰—a horrible, painful death. Why did he do that? Out of love for his elect. He endured the fiery ordeal of crucifixion so that we would not endure the fires of hell. He assumed our nature and became a man so that he could save the human race from eternal danger.

God wants us to serve him with *intentionality*, *clarity* and *sacrifice*. May it be our intention always to serve the Lord, to express the Gospel with clarity, and to present our bodies a living sacrifice, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Closing prayer: that the Lord might raise up new mission works, church-planting interns and regional home missionaries

²⁰ Phil. 2:8