

The Church is One Flock

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[0 : 00] We're in week eight of a series. We're looking at the church that Jesus builds. And we've had some huge things so far. Some of the things we've learned. The founder of the church is Jesus.

Founder, guardian, protector. We've learned how the church is not just, this is not just a resource to help you with your individual relationship with God.

But it does that, but it's not just this thing that God created to help you pray with him when you're not here.

The church is at the very center of God's redemptive plan because it's here that we see the beginning of God remaking the world. We've heard that as a body, we should contend for the gospel and self-interest and individualism individualism can harm that mission.

A few weeks ago, we heard about the mystery of our collective union with Christ. And it's this amazing idea that because we are united with Christ in such a way that when we gather, we join with heavenly hosts.

[1 : 18] And last week, Jordan preached this cracker of a sermon. And I remember one of these things that jumped out was this idea that there's no second-class citizens here. So there's no sort of like first-tier Christians and then there's kind of the lame-o Christians attend.

You know, like it's, there's no second-class, you said that, right? Like there's no second-class citizens. Yeah, no second-class citizens. So we've covered tons of ground. This week's passage, Acts 20, is very appropriate for tonight because we're commissioning St. Peter's fireside.

It's appropriate because the passages really acts like a charge to church leaders, a speech as they're heading into ministry.

You see, the context was this. As Paul has been in Ephesus for a while and he's saying goodbye to these guys, and in verse 25 it says, listen, I'm not going to see you again. And the inference there that, is that he's, well, he thinks he's going to die and so he won't get back to see them.

And so he's probably thinking, I've got one more crack at these guys. I've got one more chance to say something really important here. And so he talks about the importance of the church and the ministry of leadership in the church.

[2 : 32] So let's have a look. It does have quite an unusual start though, as you can see in verse 26. Paul says, I am innocent of the blood of you all because I preach the whole counsel of God.

The innocent blood bit is a reference that they probably would have known. Let's take it from Ezekiel 33. Let me read six verses from Ezekiel 33 to you and then explain it.

The word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, if I bring the sword upon the land and the people of the land take a man from among them and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning and the sword comes and takes them away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning. His blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken the warning, he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet so that the people are not warned and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity and his blood will require at the watchman's hand.

Do you remember those really long New Zealand tourism ads called the Lord of the Rings trilogy? Do you remember?

[4 : 16] Do you remember? In those movies there was like, invariably like these guys on mountains that just hung out there for ages waiting to light like a big bonfire, like a signal fire.

Do you remember that? Am I talking? Yep. Okay. So those guys were like watchmen. This is kind of what it's talking about, right? And so their idea is they're lookout guys.

And they see an enemy coming, they blow trumpets, light fires, whatever it is. And that's all they have to do. That's their big job. If the home army, the people at home, if they ignore that warning, you can't blame the watchman.

The watchman did his job. The watchman is innocent. So that's Ezekiel 33. Tell the people what I tell them. And if they ignore me, it's not your fault.

So this is what Paul is saying. He goes, I am innocent of your blood. I'm innocent of what's going to happen to you eternally because I told you everything. I told you the whole gospel.

[5 : 20] And the way he phrases it here is great. He says, I preached the whole counsel of God. I told you guys everything. I didn't avoid the difficult stuff, the hard stuff. I didn't preach just the cuddly passages.

Paul called them to repentance and the responsibility was now on them. At the end of a service, I'll often go up.

Like from up here, I have a great vantage point to see who's new. And at the end of a service, I'll go off and sort of track those people down and say hi to them. And if I've preached a really heavy sermon, I will invariably apologize to them.

I'll say, oh, I'm so sorry, man. This is your first night? I'm so sorry. That was really full on, wasn't it? I promise, next week, come back next week.

I'll be really nice. Like tons of jokes and it'll be all about just cuddles and you'll love it. It'll be fantastic. And I apologize because the unhealthy part of my heart wants them to like me.

[6 : 27] And I need to work on that. It's an idol. It is a great temptation for a minister to want to be liked more than they want to preach the whole counsel of God.

So, my charge here. Leaders of St. Peter's, St. John's, don't hold back.

Proclaim the whole counsel of God lest you be guilty of the blood of others. Congregations of St. Peter's and St. John's, hold your ministers accountable.

If you feel like we are giving you an itchy-bitsy gospel, you should speak up. Moving on. Verse 28.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to the whole flock and to all the flock. I love that detail there. All the flock. Ministers are called to spiritually care for people, right?

[7 : 25] All the flock. All of them. So, preach the whole counsel of God and care for all the people. The job of a minister is not just to look after the healthy people, the folks we like.

That would be easy. Where to care for the sick ones, the lost ones, the ones we don't get on with. And that can be a great challenge for ministers, for anyone in a church.

If you're a part of this community, if you're part of a family, that's your job as well. So, let's look out for those on the edges. All the people.

But you see, I skipped something right at the start there, didn't I? I want to come back to you and spend a little bit of time on. The other significant charge in verse 28, the primary charge is this.

Pay careful attention to yourselves, Paul says to the leaders of Ephesus. Pay careful attention to the flock, which includes you. Pay careful attention to yourselves.

[8 : 24] And that is because gospel ministry can exacerbate dark things in our hearts. You know, this overwhelming desire to be light can cause you to avoid preaching tough things.

An aversion to confrontation can cause a minister to spend all of his time in the study. An inflated ego. Church leaders who won't listen to anyone. A hunger for power.

Leaders who are bullies. So, all Christians, especially leaders here it's talking about, but all Christians, try and detach yourself from such things.

They can ruin you. John Calvin, when talking about this passage, says we should pay particular attention to our egos if we're involved in ministry in the church. He says this.

He goes, all corruptions of truth, so we're talking about heresy, which we're going to talk about later. All corruptions of truth flow from pride. Ambitious men will always turn away from the purity of truth and corrupt the word of God.

[9 : 26] Now, towards the end of the passage, Paul reminds them. He goes, listen, I can't be accused of having dodgy motivations when it comes to ministry, especially in the area of money, 33 and 34.

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who are with me. So, he specifically talks about money here, and he says, I didn't take any money from you.

I wasn't interested in your money. I actually worked in order to minister to you. And what a fantastic example, considering how our hearts can so easily be entrapped by materialism.

I just read in the paper a couple of days ago in New Zealand, there was an evangelist traveling around New Zealand, visiting from the UK, who, he wrote a book, and the basic gist of the book is this.

Kidnapped by his grandfather when he was seven, taken to China to be trained as a kung fu master, and became a bodyguard for the rich and famous.

[10 : 27] Ended up in jail. I mean, it's just a bad Jean-Claude Van Damme movie, right? And then he became a Christian in jail, and now he's turning around talking about how he met God, etc. The story just sounded so ridiculous to some people in the UK.

They investigated him, and they found out that it's 99% nonsense. It's complete nonsense. And what things, what things must have captured this man's heart to invent such a ridiculous life and parade around the world on such an awful line?

But there are actually, sadly, plenty of guys like that around with unchecked hearts. So leaders of St. John's, St. Peter's, as you go about the work of God, do what Paul says here.

Pay attention to your hearts. There's slippery, slippery things. Sometimes I ask myself this question regularly. It doesn't make sense.

I ask my question, I ask this question regularly of myself. I say, what's my goal here in Vancouver? Am I, is my goal for this life to live the West Coast dream, which is so attractive? Or is it a life of sacrifice, a life worked out in fear and trembling before God?

[11 : 49] And that's a great litmus test for me. So, the whole counsel of God to all of the people, and all of the people includes you.

So far, this charge that Paul gives the leaders of the church plants in Ephesus is huge, right? It's quite overwhelming. But, it's not just charging the leaders with tasks.

You know, preach well, care for everyone, watch your heart. It's not just saying that. When you look at the passage, Paul is actually saying something about the very nature of church. Something that's really important that we understand.

Let's have a look. Here we go. Look at the end of verse 28 there. The church was obtained by his own blood. What does it tell us? The church was obtained by his own blood.

That you, me, us, this, this, this is precious to God. Very precious to God. It must be because the existence of the church came about at great cost to him.

[13 : 00] I remember my daughter, you know, most of you know the story of my daughter who was born with Down syndrome. She's 14 months old now. Born with a heart defect. First three months of her life she was dying. And then she had heart surgery and was, she's good now.

She's good. However, those first few months of her life, folks, it is a, a terrible thing. A terrible, terrible thing to see your child suffer.

A terrible thing. A great price was paid for this. A price willingly paid. Because you are a treasure to God.

A treasure. Such a treasure. That the whole God here, the Trinity, is involved in the upkeep and the ongoingness of the church. Look at 28, the full part of 28.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock to which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God which he obtained by his own blood. You see, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit all at work here.

[14 : 13] So, St. Peter's, St. John's. This is good stuff to bear in mind when we think about our attitudes towards attendance, financial giving, serving, such commitments.

St. Peter's, what you guys are doing starting next week is not just a cool project. It's not just like a cool new thing to get involved in.

It belongs to God and a great, great price was paid so that it could exist and it is very, very precious to him.

Finally, before jumping on the boat, Paul issues a warning to the church leaders of Ephesus. Verse 29 and 30, I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves, isn't this awful, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

Of course, what Paul predicted came true and you don't have to go far to prove it. When you read the epistles of the New Testament, you read Revelations, you cannot throw a rock without hitting the word false teachers.

[15 : 32] Plenty of these folks around in the early church, plenty of them around today. This means that pastors, ministers, have two roles. We preach the truth, feeding the flock, and then we whack the wolves and get rid of the wolves.

I find verse 30 so brutal though, because it reminds us that wolves might sound and look like us because they are one of us sometimes. They might even wear bishops' robes.

In our previous diocese, our former bishop preached at St. John's. Goodness, this is quite a while ago now. He preached at St. John's and denied the resurrection of Jesus in a very subtle way, a very subtle way.

He said, did Jesus really die from the dead? And then summarized and questioned and formed different theories on what might have happened. Or was it that he just rose in the hearts of the disciples?

Now I've heard this man was a brilliant communicator, relevant and germane and subtle and sophisticated, and some people were duped. He was, is a heretic, he was a wolf amongst the sheep.

[16 : 44] There's something else to think about that, you know, perhaps these wolves won't just be slick-talking men and women who sort of disrupt our orbits, you know.

For folks like us, maybe it's just the collective weight of quite a sophisticated society that holds up different values to us, you know. Perhaps our society can be a false teacher, the wolf among us.

Here are some heresies we can buy into quite easily with regards to that. My sin isn't so bad. What I'm doing right now would be okay in any other context apart from church.

It's just mischievous fun. That's a heresy. That's, sin is bad. It separates you from God. Another heresy would be something like this. My status or kind of what a great person I am affords me preferential treatment from God.

You know, I'm a good guy. I've done all right. I pray with confidence because I'm a, I'm just a really, I'm a good person. That's the opposite of the gospel. That's the, you're only good standing with God is because of Christ.

[17 : 51] But it's so easy to slip into heresies like that because society, the collective weight of society, wants us to believe we are essentially good. That's not the case.

Folks, in terms of the gospel, heresies are devastating. And it's why Paul uses this picture of wolves and the flock to show us just how devastating and dangerous they can be.

See, he doesn't just say they're really bad lies and people think naughty things for a bit. No, he uses this devastating picture of a wolf in amongst sheep.

Now, we don't have, we don't have wolves in New Zealand but we do have dogs. We have millions and millions, we have 50 million sheep, we have tons of wild dogs and even domestic dogs. But even if a domestic dog wanders onto a farm in New Zealand, a farmer will not give a second thought to shooting that dog.

It's because big dogs will kill sheep. Little lambs will tear their limbs off. That's why fundamental doctrine is so important and why what the church is doing at the moment in its catechism classes is so vital for our ongoing discipleship, keeping the main stuff, the plain stuff ever before us.

[19 : 14] Why liturgy? Why we do this every week? It's keeping the basic gospel ever before us because we are sheep. You should accept the insult that that implies.

You know, sheep are wayward. Sheep are stubborn. They're I come from a sheep country. They're dirty.

They constantly need to be dipped in really full on chemicals to get rid of lice and worms and stuff. You go around cliffs around New Zealand you'll invariably find carcasses at the bottom of the cliff.

They're just sheep just fall off, just walk off cliffs. So, St. Peter's, St. John's.

Here's the final charge here. If you come across heresy in a sermon, in a home group, in a Bible study, in a conversation, it should be confronted.

[20 : 21] Not angrily, not like, you know, Satan! Why are you before me? I just, this is my first time here, I've got some ideas, I just wanted to share them. No, you know, they should be confronted, they should be confronted lovingly, firmly, and gospel clarity should be brought to that situation because the stakes are too high not to be.

Look at the current state of the Anglican Church of Canada. Look at great swaths of the Episcopal Church in the States. It is like this because good people did not confront heresy, because the under-shepherds betrayed the heavenly shepherd and let wolves run amok amongst the sheep.

So, what have we learnt? Preach the whole counsel of God. Care for all the people of God.

Leaders, and it's all of us, pay careful attention to your hearts, they're so slippery, and lead the sheep to pasture and guard the sheep against the wolves.

Dr. God GRÜNEN is like, I have a kind of emmentma from the priests to the victory of witnesses.