

The Church
Acts 20:26-38
April 11, 2010
FBC Waynesboro
First in series on Ephesians

What would you say to a group of fellow believers if you knew that you were speaking to them for the very last time? That is the scene here in Acts 20. Paul is on the island of Miletus from which he sends for the elders in the church in Ephesus. He sends for them in part because of the strategic location and thus the spiritual significance of this church. Something in him causes him to know beyond doubt that he will never see them again upon the earth but he needs to speak to them before his departure. And what he says to them is simple: I have given to you the whole counsel of God. I have taught you clearly and accurately the truth of the Word of God. Take what I have given you and keep teaching it to the people of God that are under your care. Satan will slip in through men who are even among you now and seek to destroy the church by getting her to compromise the Gospel. But you stay steadfast in your commitment to the word of Truth and you communicate that truth to the people of God because God has chosen for the glory of His name to do His work in the world through His people in the church. His final words were about faithfulness to the truth of the Word of God so that the people of God might be grounded in this Truth as they live out this Truth among themselves and in witness to the world. Paul's final words were that the church be the church and that those called to lead do so in a way that keeps the church focused on the glory of God and faithful to the Gospel of God.

What we see in this passage in Acts 20 in relationship to the church in Ephesus is what we see in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Now we know that in all the most ancient manuscripts of this letter there is no place designation. It does not say that Paul was writing to the church in Ephesus or to any other church in particular. What is clear from the early manuscripts that this is a letter from Paul to every particular church and to no church in particular; it is written to the church. And it comes very near the end of Paul's life. Some would argue that the last letters of Paul are the two he wrote to Timothy and one to Titus but the last letter he wrote to the church, to the whole church is this one. It is his last will and testament to the church which was purchased by the blood of Christ and to which Paul would give his life. There is no more critical time than now particularly in our

culture to hear the truth of this letter from Paul. So we begin today a 25-30 week journey through this letter. It answers very clearly for us the question of who the church is to be and what the church is to do in the world. This letter is dominated by Paul's passion for the church to be what she is. In fact, the word for church is found nine times in a six chapter letter. And the idea of the church is present when the word for church is absent. Paul was greatly concerned about the church and her loss of focus; never has there been a time when that issue is more critical than right now. This little but large letter from Paul was written to declare the glory of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as embodied in and expressed through the church. So, let's begin our journey by looking at just some of what Paul teaches us here about the church.

He opens his letter by proclaiming to us the powerful promises that are ours in Christ Jesus. It is imperative that we get this little phrase "in Christ Jesus" or "in Christ" clear in our minds at the beginning. It relates to the individual and his or her personal relationship with Jesus only as the point of initiation. This term is completely corporate. To be in Christ or in Christ Jesus is to be committed to Christ as Lord, connected with other believers who carry this same commitment, and to be conducting our lives in connection with others on the basis of this commitment. One of the great threats to the church in our day is the individualizing and personalizing of our relationship with God to the exclusion of the necessity of the investment of our lives in the church. This is not new. It is just more pervasive now and more presented more persuasively. It was present in the first century and took root in the second century. So, Paul begins his letter by pointing out the great promises that are given us in Christ Jesus and then he prays for his fellow brothers and sisters in the church, 1:19-23.

He wants us to know what the church is. It is the body of Christ over which Christ is the head. The language here is precise. God has made Christ the sole authority over the church, the source of energy for the church, and the one who shapes the identity of the church. Christ rules over His church which He has redeemed with His blood. And it is in the church and through the church that He accomplishes all that is going to be accomplished. Paul makes this plain in verse 23. The church is the fullness for the faithful outworking of the purposes of God in everything that God is doing and in every way that it is being done. God glorifies Himself in and through the church giving to the church all that is needed in order for us to fulfill His purpose for the praise of His Name. Do we really know

what this means? Do we really believe this? Everything that you need in order to be what God has called and commissioned you to be will be found in the church: passion, power, purpose, prosperity, success, significance, standing etc. So, what are you looking for? It is found for the glory of God by the power of His Spirit on the foundation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in and through His church. Is this how we see the church: we would rather be here involved with God's people than anywhere on earth?

Let's look at a second image. We will explore each of this in great depth as we get to them in our study of Ephesians. We are simply looking at the landscape this morning of the monumental manifesto. Paul sees the church as the household of God or the family of faith. Body of Christ is a physical image. Household of God or family of faith is a social or domestic image, 2:18-21. Listen to the residential terms that are used here: citizens, household, built, foundation, cornerstone, structure, temple, dwelling place. The whole idea here is that the church the dominating domicile for the child of God. This does not mean that we move our beds here or build closets for our clothes but it does mean that it is the central core of life for the children of God. When the church meets those who belong to God as children have a longing to be with the family. And we want to be with the family as much as possible. Our concern is not, "we have to go again?" But why is it that we only meet two days a week and then only for a short time? This is my family, my real family with whom I will spend eternity. This is the household of God.

This picture of the church comes at an interesting point in the letter. It comes after Paul has made plain what it really means to be a believer. He begins with all the promises that we have in Christ and then turns in chapter two to what it really means to be in Christ. He does not assume that they are. Neither should we. And after the proclamation of power of God in the salvation of Jew and Gentile, Paul points out that God brings both together into the church where we live out our lives as brothers and sisters knowing that this is our family, more fundamental and foundational than any other family. If you doubt this reality and some do in our day, look at where this picture of the church comes in the letter in the light of Paul's teaching about the family. It comes long before it and even in his teaching about the family he is clear that your family is simply a reflection of His family that forms the foundation for your life. Is this how we see the church?

Do we love the church more than any other organizational reality of which we are a part?

Well, look with me briefly at two more images of the church. Paul pictures the church in Ephesians 3-4 as an army of soldiers equipped for battle in the world, 3:7-13. John Piper reminds us that a mystery is not a secret. It is a manifestation of God that awaits its time but when its time comes, it is made plain. We see two of these mysteries in Paul's letter. One is here in terms of God's purpose for His people in the church: we are the ones and the only ones in whom and through whom God works to bring down the strongholds of Satan in the world. We are lovers of God who by our worship of God and our witness to His glory in the world by our declaring the truth of the Gospel are used of God to declare victory over the enemy. It should not surprise us then that Satan's strategy in order to deter and seek to defeat the church is to slip some his own into the church and call us to worldliness. As long as we think like the world thinks and acts like the world acts, we are a pitiful and puny bunch of ground grunts in the army of God; oh, we will be successful in growing numbers and may even prosper by the world's standards. We could even avoid suffering which is a most sure sign that we must be serving God. But who wants that? When the church gets serious about being the church in the world for the glory of God and the advance of the Gospel then all hell will break loose against that church and the church will then rejoice greatly because she is the church and by the grace of God she will prevail. Too many churches in our day do not have to storm the gates of hell because they have done nothing to stir up the gates of hell; in fact those who are inside the gates of hell are quite soothed and satisfied by what too many of our churches are saying and doing.

Paul makes it plain in chapter four that God raises up men in the church whom He appoints to and anoints for leadership whose calling is to teach the Word of God to the People of God so that the people of God can live out the purpose of God in the world. A church where godly men teach the truth of God to people who have a passion to be the people of God is a wonderful place to be. It is a pleasurable place for people who are saved and who are being sanctified. It is a painful place for the lost and the lukewarm.

One final image. Paul calls the church the bride of Christ who is purchased by His blood and now lives under His care in the corrupt conditions of this world.

One day the bridegroom Jesus is going to come for His church and He will wash her completely clean and make her perfectly pure. The encouragement here is that we are not clean now and need to know it and are far from perfect. The measure for us as a church is not perfection nor is it purity which does not mean that we settle then for mediocrity. The measure for us now is how much we love the bridegroom. How much do we desire Him and how devoted are we to Him?

I want us to see two things in this final image of the church the second of which I hope will help us to see just how important this series really is. First, Paul states here ten truths about the church. I am simply going to list them. They are on your outline; you can read them. One, Christ is the head of the church. Two, Christ is the Savior of the Church which is His body; Three, The church lives in submission to Christ; Four, Christ loved the church; Five, Christ gave Himself for the church; Six, Christ sanctifies the church through His Word; Seven, Christ will glorify the church; Eight, Christ cares for the church and nurtures the church; Nine, We members of His Church, Ten, Marriage is a mysterious display of Christ and the church.

It is number ten that leads me to the second thing that I hope will help you to see why this is so important. God has given us here a mirror or to shift images—he has given us here a red flag. Here is the mirror or red flag: the extent to which we understand what marriage is and honor it is the extent to which we understand what the church is and honor it. The extent to which we dishonor marriage is the extent to which we are dishonoring the church. Do you think we need help in seeing and savoring what the church is as the embodiment and expression of the glory of God by way of the Gospel of Christ? If your answer is “yes” then be a part of this journey through this most powerful book of the Bible.