



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dr. S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 20:25–28

“The Integrity of Paul’s Ministry: Part II”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] The Scripture reading this morning is just slightly longer than that mentioned in our bulletin. We’re reading Acts chapter 20, verse 25 through verse 31. We are in the midst of the study of the book of Acts and, particularly, at the moment we’re looking at the only message to Christians recorded by Luke. It is Paul’s message to the elders of the church at Ephesus, which he gave to them at Miletus. And last week, we looked at the opening part of it and now, today, we’re going to look at the middle part of it. And next week, the Lord willing, we will conclude our study of this really great and significant message that Paul gave those elders. The Scripture reading begins with verse 25. The apostle is speaking of his ministry that he has given at Ephesus in the years past and he says to the elders.

“And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers.

That word “overseers” is a word in the Greek text which means bishops; and it is evident from this that elder and bishop are synonymous terms in the New Testament; one referring to the dignity of

the office, an elder, a man with spiritual maturity; and bishop, one that refers to his duty, for a bishop is an overseer and, consequently, he is the one who is responsible for the oversight of the believers.

“To feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

Now, if you have a Bible with some marginal notes, and possibly also different translations, you may notice that there are different renderings of this verse. There are two reasons for this. One is that there is a difference of reading in the original text. For example, some of the manuscripts have “to feed the church of the Lord.” That, probably, is not the genuine reading. Then, also, it is possible to render the latter part of the verse, “which he hath purchased with his own blood,” in two ways. We can render it, “which he hath purchased with his own blood,” or we can render the Greek text, “which he has purchased with the blood of his own one.” In other words, a reference to an individual. That expression was an expression of endearment at the time that the New Testament was written.

Personally, I think, that is likely the correct reading or translation. And so we should read, “To feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with the blood of his own one.” That, of course, then would be a reference to the Father, God, the church of God, which he has purchased with the blood of his own one, the Lord Jesus Christ. And since he has just mentioned that it is the Holy Spirit which has made the elders at Ephesus overseers, we then have in this one text, as is often the case in the New Testament, a reference to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity; the Holy Spirit, the Son and the Father. Now, in the 29th verse, Paul continues.

“For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Our Gracious God and Heavenly Father, we come to Thee through the way of access that Thou hast set forth in the Word of God, through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the covenantal head of the people of God, the Mediator, who has through the shedding of his own precious blood made it possible for unholy people to enter into fellowship with Thee, the Holy One of Israel, the Holy God. We are grateful, Lord, for the greatness of the work of the Son of God, who has made all of this possible, and we worship Thee today, on this beautiful day, and we thank Thee for the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ. We thank Thee for the way in which Thou hast been faithful to Thy Word, in fulfilling all of the promises of the Word of God.

And we give Thee thanks for the future fulfillment of the remainder of the promises, which have to do with the days that lie ahead. Surely, we are indeed a people blessed in a most marvelous way and we give Thee thanks, today.

We, also, Lord, pray for our country, for our president. We ask Thy blessing upon the United States and we pray that Thou wilt, by Thy grace, enable us in the country to have Thy protecting hand, and deliver us from so many of the kinds of evils that lie in wait for us as a nation. We pray for our president, we pray, Lord, that Thou will be with him, and for all of the governments under which we live, we ask Thy blessing upon them.

We especially, Lord, remember the whole body of Christ, the church of true believers, and Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. We pray Thy blessing upon each of the individuals in whatever body they may find their place of fellowship. We pray that Thou wilt be with them, build them up in the faith, strengthen them, protect them from apostasy, and we ask, Lord, that we may look forward with anticipation to the future when we enter Thy presence, conformed by Thy grace to the image of the Son of God.

We thank Thee for Believers Chapel, for its elders and for its deacons, and for its members and friends, and our visitors in the audience today. Lord, we pray that Thou wilt bless each one of them. We ask Thy blessing upon the ministry of the Chapel, in its radio ministry, in its Bible classes, in its tape ministry and other forms of outreach. O God, we are thankful for the past, we pray that the future, if it should please Thee, may be even brighter. We thank Thee for those whose names are listed in our Calendar of Concern, and for those who need the prayers of the saints, Lord, we bring them all before Thee. For those who are ill, who are sick, or bereaving, we especially pray for them. We thank Thee and praise Thee for the promises of the Word of God, and, Lord, we count upon Thee to fulfill and realize all of them, in our experience. Be with us now as we continue our service together.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] I look out over the audience this morning and notice that there are several of you, at least, who were not here last Sunday morning, when we began the study of Paul’s message to the Ephesian elders. And there were several things that were said last Sunday that are important as an introduction to the continuation of the message and for those of you that were here, I hope that you will not mind if I repeat one or two things, with which I introduced the message last week.

Paul’s ministry was a ministry that was characterized by integrity, and I made reference to the fact that the word “integer” in Latin is a word that means whole, or complete, or entire. And when one examines the ministry of the apostle, it had soundness, it had completeness and it was characterized by an incorruptibility that might be defined as an honesty, a firm adherence to a set of values. And the set of values were the set of values that are set out in Holy Scripture.

J. H. Jowett, a famous British preacher once said that he saw the track of a bleeding hare, across the snow. And then he made the statement that that was Paul’s track across Europe, laying stress upon the fact that the apostle was so committed to the ministry that had been given to him. And his ministry was so filled with integrity that that one determination to do the will of God guided

him in all that he was engaged in. and the result was that he suffered for the ministry of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We laid stress upon the fact, last week, that the gospel is naturally an offense to man, because it tells him that he must be born again and that there cannot be acceptance with God if there is not a transformation of his inner being, through the gospel of the grace of God.

One learns when he listens to Paul and to the other preachers of the New Testament for that matter, that they majored in the major things and not the minor things. They majored in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. They did not speak on the Geneva Conferences of their day. They did not speak on poverty. As a matter of fact, the Lord Jesus laid to rest the significance of poverty, as over against the gospel, in the 12th chapter of the Gospel of John, when speaking in the house of Lazarus and Martha of Bethany. He said, “The poor you always have with you, but me ye have not always.”

Now, we do not denigrate at all the fact that it is important for us to be concerned about the poor; but what we are talking about is priorities, and the priority for the apostles was the preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the ultimate well-being of a man’s physical being is secondary to the ultimate well being of his spiritual and eternal soul or spirit. I know that it is often said that we cannot expect to reach man’s spirit or soul if we do not touch the needs of his body. And there is some truth in that. But we should remember that the priority of the gospel minister is the preaching of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I mentioned last week, also, that I had read an article a couple of years ago, by a very well-known and highly regarded Methodist ministry, a minister of a large Methodist church in the city of Greenville, in the great state of South Carolina. And Dr. Willermon, in the course of this article entitled, “What I Learned at School,” commented on the things that teaching in theological seminary he is a professor at Duke Divinity School, part-time, as well as pastor of the large church in Greenville, commenting on the things that he had learned from his dual ministry. He made reference to the fact that seminaries and their teachers can do well in helping the church to think clearly.

“Seminaries,” he said, “need more confidence in what they do best.” And he mentioned that at a recent conference on evangelism, in his church, in his own denomination, after a number of participants had called on the seminaries to establish chairs of evangelism and to teach pastors evangelistic techniques, one pastor in desperation said, “We don’t need more evangelists or techniques for evangelism, we need to know the evangel.” And what he was simply saying is that in our denomination it is evident that we have majored on minor things, and we have neglected the preaching of the gospel to such an extent that today we need stress upon the gospel itself. We need to learn what it is.

Now, I do not think that that could ever have been said about the apostle Paul. He majored in the major thing, which is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. This message, as I mentioned in the Scripture reading, is the only one to Christians recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. And it reveals some very important facets of church polity. Now, for those of you who may be unacquainted with the term “polity” since it’s a technical term used in our theological seminaries often; polity means simply a form of church organization. For example, there are three major polities: There is the Episcopalian polity, by which the church is ruled by bishops. Not only is the Episcopalian Church Episcopalian in its polity, but for example, the Methodist Church is also Episcopalian in its polity. There is the Presbyterian polity, by which the church is ruled by a general assembly, ultimately, of elders; and then, the congregational form, by which the church is ruled in a more democratic way. And then there are also some other more minor forms of church government, which have some claims for genuineness as well. Then, of course, there are some mixtures of these. But when we are talking about church polity, and when we are talking about Paul’s message to the Ephesian elders, we are talking about the polity, the form of church organization, that Paul’s words give testimony to.

Now, the apostle, in this great message, first of all reminds them of his ministry among them. For over three years, he had been in the company of the Ephesians, one time, for about three years entirely. And so, he goes back over his ministry to remind them of the things that he had done

when he was with them. Then, he exhorts the elders and finally, he concludes with a word of farewell, which we will save for next week, as our farewell of Acts chapter 20.

We are now in the midst of the words that he is speaking, in vindication of his ministry and in verse 25 through verse 27, he concludes his vindication by speaking of a satisfying past. Now, it’s satisfying not simply because Paul was sure that everything that he had done was in accordance with the will of God; it’s satisfying, simply, because he says, “I have faithfully proclaimed the message of God. I am pure from the blood of all men.”

I think if you looked at Paul’s preaching, and particularly his preaching among the Ephesians, you would notice that one of the great emphases of his teaching and the thing to which he is alluding here, is that he preached the gospel not simply to Jews, but also to Gentiles. He speaks of himself as the apostle of the Gentiles and when he speaks of being pure from the blood of all men, he means all kinds of men; that is, Jews and Gentiles. Paul did not preach the gospel to every single individual, but he preached the gospel to Jews and Gentiles.

Now, you have to understand the background of the New Testament to understand what that meant, because remember, the promises of God were given into the hands of Jewish men. The Bible is largely written by Jewish men. When the Lord Jesus was here, he said he was not sent to the Gentiles, he was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He was a minister of the circumcision, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers. But then, of course, the gospel as a result of the rejection of that message by the nation, but not all Jewish men and women, went out to the four corners of the earth. And so Paul in that context, speaks of being pure from the blood of all men, all kinds of men; that is, not everybody without exception, but everyone without distinction; so important in understanding the New Testament.

He says in the 25th verse, “You know that I have gone out preaching the kingdom of God, and you know now as a result of what I am saying to you, that you shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men.” That’s a remarkable statement and it’s one, I think, that we should lay a bit more stress upon. I have no

doubt, as do most of the commentators, that the apostle is alluding to a figure of speech that is found in the Old Testament, particularly, in the book of Ezekiel, because it’s found there more than once. For example, in the 3rd chapter and then I believe in about the 13th chapter of Ezekiel, and, finally, in the 33rd chapter, this figure of speech is used to express faithfulness in the preaching of a message from the Lord God.

I’m going read these verses from Ezekiel 33, beginning at verse 1, because I think that will help us to understand what Paul means. The prophet writes.

“Again the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, ‘Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, when I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman. If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people, then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet and taketh not warning; if the sword come and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul.’”

So, in effect, the prophet says, “If the Lord God says that there is coming a time of judgment and they have set a man to warn the people of this, like a prophet, if he blows the trumpet, if he warns the people, then those who hear the sound of the trumpet and do not take the warning, then his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and so on. Now, in verse 6, we read:

“But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman’s hand. So thou, O son of man [he’s talking to Ezekiel], I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and

warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.”

So the apostle, using that figure says, “I take you to record this day that I am pure from the blood of all men. I have warned you, through the preaching of the gospel of Christ, of the inevitable consequences of rejection of the message concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself as sacrifice for our sins.”

Now, in verse 27, he says, “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” The catholicity of the gospel, it is offered to all, it is found in the Word of God.

Now, having said that, that concludes the apostle’s vindication of his ministry. He turns then to exhortation, and the exhortation is directed toward the elders. Someone has called this, Richard Rackham, an Anglican commentator on the New Testament, has called this, “The charter of the Christian ministry, from a pastoral viewpoint.” “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Paul, in effect says, “I fulfill my responsibility, I am pure from the blood of all men, and now it is your responsibility to take heed to yourselves and to the flock, which belongs to the Lord God.”

Now, I’d like for you to notice the order in which the apostle says this. He says, “Take heed to yourselves.” Ourselves, first, as elders, ourselves, first, as bishops of the church. A person can be no good to the Christian church if he, himself, is not warm and fervent in his own heart. An elder who is not warm and fervent in heart can by no means create warmth and fervency in the flock of God. And so, in any kind of endeavor in Christian work, it’s impossible for us to create any sense of zeal in the work of God, if we ourselves have no zeal. And so, the apostle says, “Take heed to yourselves,” first, as an elder, men are responsible for the flock of God.

Over the past year or so, I have been reading a couple of diaries of Scottish Presbyterian ministers. One I finished, it was five hundred and thirty-five pages long; I am reading another one which I don’t know whether they like to have diaries that are five hundred and thirty-five pages long, but this one is also five hundred and thirty-five pages long. It’s a diary of Andrew Bonar, a very wonderful Christian minister of the Church of Scotland, one who was the close friend of Robert Murray McCheyne, and wrote the memoirs of McCheyne, as well as some other works. Mr. Bonar’s diary is filled with things that come from his heart. And, as a minister in the Church of Scotland, over and over, page after page after page, he speaks of being down upon his knees, praying, of how he doesn’t pray enough. Then he talks about how he has managed to pray three hours and he says, he’s still not praying enough. You get the impression as you read through his diary that here was a man who was wholly committed to the care of the saints. It’s very obvious.

And just last night, that’s after I finished going over the message for today, I sat down and read some more pages, and he describes his experience of being at the bedside of his infant child, as his infant child died. And it was a very remarkable thing, how the Lord sustained him; how over the period of a week, the child with scarlet fever, he felt one day the child was getting better. The next day, he was getting work. The doctor finally told him there was no hope. And then, two days later, sitting by the side of the little child, he committed the child to the Lord God. He spoke about his ministry to the little child. That’s what I would call “taking heed to yourselves and to the flock of God.” So the apostle says, “You elders, take heed to yourselves first, and then to all the flock of God.” Now, the flock belongs to the Lord God, and Paul is using an expression, which he derived from the 74th Psalm.

John Milton, in one of his works, has one of the most critical works that could ever be written concerning preachers; he makes a comment about certain men who were elders or bishops. And he says that, “They are blind mouths.” Those words almost seem to contradict one other. But that’s the tragedy that is possible for every servant of the Lord God, to be a blind mouth.

Now, what’s so bad about that, of course, is that the man who ministers the Word of God, the one who shepherds the flock, is the supposed, of all men, to be able to see spiritual things. But Milton describes him as blind.

Now, the second thing about one who ministers the Word of God is that he is one who is to feed the flock of God. But he’s described by Milton as a mouth. In other words, a person who cannot see, and instead of feeding the flock, he desires only to be fed by the flock. Now, unfortunately, there are many of us who minister the Word of God that fall into that category. Blind, because we do not see the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, or if we see it, we put other things in front of it. And then, our mouths, desiring to be fed rather than desiring to feed the flock of God.

Now, Paul says, “Over which,” or “In which,” or actually there is one sense in which an elder could be called “over a body,” because he does rule in the body. But in this particular place, the apostle uses the preposition “in.” Among which or in which, the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. In other words, we are part of the flock. Elders, bishops, are those whom God has appointed to feed the flock of God. Now, I’d like for you to notice that they are made overseers and elders, not by self-election, not by human ordination, but they are made elders by divine appointment, among whom the “Holy Ghost has made you an elder.” The Lord Jesus has made it very plain that the elder is to be an individual who is to have oversight and he’s to be part of the flock, but to serve within the flock as one who feeds the flock. In that sense only is he over the flock. And he is appointed by the Holy Spirit.

We have things backward in the church, often; we think if a person wants to be an elder, then he ought to be an elder. And the next thing that we try to do is to be voted into the office by people. That is, unfortunately, what has caused some of the difficulties in our churches. Because, in many of our churches, when a man is put up for an office, like the office of overseer, the office of elder, then he is voted; and thus it is thought he becomes an elder. You don’t become an elder by vote; you don’t become an elder by self-choice. You become an elder in only one way, by divine appointment.

Now, that means that if an individual has not been appointed by the Holy Spirit, we may call him elder. He may somehow or another find his way in among the elders, who have been appointed by the Holy Spirit, but he’s still not an elder. And on the other hand, there may be some individual who has been appointed by the Holy Spirit as an elder, who is an elder, but is not yet recognized by the church as an elder. Often young people come to me and say, because they know I’m an old elder, although I am no longer serving as an elder, for many years I did. So they come and they tell me they want to be an elder. And they think that the way you become an elder is by wanting to be, and then somehow or another, being appointed to the office; then you begin to serve as elder. That’s not the way, that’s not the way. You become an elder by appointment of the Holy Spirit and then you begin to function as an elder, whether men recognize you or not. After all, whom are you serving? You’re serving the Lord God, and you are serving the people of God. And so, consequently, when God the Holy Spirit has appointed you to the office of elder, you begin to oversee. And it’s not long before the elders, if they have any spiritual insight at all, and ours do have spiritual insight, when they see an individual who is functioning as an elder. He believes the doctrines of the Word of God, he stands for the principles on which the church is established, he has the kind of concern that a bishop has for the spiritual well-being of the saints of God, and he is functioning in helping the saints in a spiritual way. Then the elders say, it’s obvious the Holy Spirit has appointed this man to office. We will recognize him as an elder, inviting him to serve with us in the work of the Lord. That’s the way in which a person becomes recognized as an elder. It’s not that elders appoint elders. Elders recognize those whom the Holy Spirit has appointed, and who have begun to function as elders. It’s so simple. But the fundamental thing is, one must be appointed by the Holy Spirit. So Paul says, “Take heed to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers.”

And, listen, let me tell some of you young men this. If you function as an elder, you feel that God has appointed you to the office first, and if you are functioning as an elder, and if the elders haven’t yet discovered your functioning, remember, it is the Lord that you serve not the elders. And, it is the flock that you are serving, not the elders. Go about your task and it won’t be long, in my

guess, that the elders will be most happy to have the help of someone appointed by the Holy Spirit, who is functioning as an elder. Of course, it is important that you agree with the doctrines of the Word of God as the elders understand them. They do not want men who will be a divisive force in the church, but if they have convictions that the elders have, then so far as I know the door is open for men to function and serve as an elder in Believers Chapel.

So now, he comes to the task of an elder. He says the task of an elder is “to feed the church of God.” That is a Greek word *poimainō* that means “to shepherd.” It’s the word from which we get the word for pastor. So all of the elders do the work of pastoring.

Now, we must make a distinction here, because there are some who think that there is such an office as the office of pastor/teacher. The New Testament, of course, says nothing about that. You can read through the New Testament entirely. There’s no such thing as the office of pastor. There is the spiritual gift of pastor/teacher; but there is nothing in the New Testament that says that all of the elders have the gift of pastor/teacher. Now, there is the gift of faith, there is the gift of giving; everybody gives. All Christians have faith. But spiritual gifts are spiritual abilities, to perform particular services in the church of Christ.

There are two kinds of elders, although they serve as one body. Paul said, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, all elders rule,” but then he added, “Especially those labor in the Word and doctrine.” Some elders have spiritual gifts of utterance, others do not have. But all rule, all shepherd. All elders must be apt to teach. What does “apt to teach” mean? Why, it means that I can sit down here, with three young men on the front row here, and that means, if I’m an elder, I can sit down and I can lead them into the doctrines of the Christian faith. And, furthermore, I can also defend the doctrines against the many kinds of heretical teaching that are floating about outside the church and also inside the church, as Paul makes plain. So an elder is an individual who knows the truth, he does not necessarily have the gift of pastor/teacher, and, thus, able to keep the attention of an audience for forty-five minutes. I’m not sure I have that this

morning. But, anyway, that is something a little more than just the ability to instruct in the Christian faith. So Paul says that the elders “feed the church of God.” They shepherd them.

What’s characteristic of a shepherd? Well, if you’ve been to Scotland, if you know anything about those shepherds that are still over there, you know that shepherds lead the flock. Actually, the word shepherd is a term throughout the Bible that is almost synonymous with rule. But, at any rate, they lead the flock, they guard the flock from wolves, and they see that the flock has sustenance or food. That’s the work of an elder. That’s what he does. He leads them, he guards them, he feeds them, and woe to the shepherd or elder who is negligent for the flock, or of the flock, because the flock belongs to the Lord God and is exceedingly precious to Him.

“Feed the flock of God.”

Now, it’s called “the church of God,” here because it belongs to the Lord God. And then, he says, “Which He has purchased.” That’s a marvelous little word. It’s not the common word for “to buy” in the sense of buying a slave out of the slave market, a word used in the New Testament with reference to ancient customs. This is a word that means, “to get for one’s own.”

In fact, when I was teaching New Testament Greek, I used to illustrate it by going to the blackboard and just putting a lot of dots on the board. And then, taking a piece of chalk and drawing a ring around it, and saying, “I have made these things my own.” That’s the force of this word who has, “feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.” He has got it for himself by the act of redemption at Calvary’s cross. It’s through that that we have the forgiveness of sins. Huxley bluntly announced some years ago, “There is no such thing as forgiveness.” Bernard Shaw declared, in a similar vein, “Forget this as a beggars refuge, we must pay our debts.” The only trouble with Bernard Shaw’s words is that we cannot pay our debts, we do not have the spiritual capital to pay the debt of sin. H. G. Wells said that, “The ultimate power is a harsh implacable hostility.” My teacher, James Stewart, at the University of Edinburgh, replied by saying, “Thanks for the information,” to these men, “but it’s not your high-found logic, it’s heaven’s grace that reigns in the church of Jesus Christ.” “Blessed be His grace,” cried John Bunyan, when this discover broke upon

him, “that Scripture would call, as running after me, I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins.” Indeed, Bunyan said, “This would make me make a little stop, and as it were, look over my shoulder behind me, to see if I could discern that the God of grace did follow me with a pardon in His hand.” Isn’t that magnificent? The God of grace seeking the lost, following after them with a pardon in His hand, by virtue of the blood that was shed on Calvary’s cross.

Men have stood at the cross of Christ and have impeached the governor of this universe by saying, as one of Dostoyevsky’s characters says, looking at a painting of the crucifixion, “A man might lose his faith by looking at that picture.” And the friend standing by him said, “That’s what’s happening to me.” But when we look at the cross and think of it as only a human transaction, as if it were simply a mere propitiation offered from a human being on earth to God in heaven, that would be a hopeless kind of thing. But when we think of it as the divine purpose, by which the Son of God, the second person of the eternal Trinity, came to earth, took to himself a human nature, and in that human nature offered the atoning sacrifice to the Lord God for the people of God, then we have the eternal purpose of God and it’s God who is active at the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ, preeminently, and not man. So, “He has purchased the church of Jesus Christ with His own blood,” or, perhaps, “the blood of his own one.”

John Calvin, in commenting upon this, says that, “There are four reasons why, as a result of this, the Lord God is very concerned about the diligence of elders. They know that God has pledged faithfulness to the church of Christ, therefore, having been put into their hands, they must be faithful. They are in authority, not by man but by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has appointed them. It’s no ordinary honor to rule in the church of God.” And, finally, Calvin goes on to say, “The fourth reason with which Paul urges the pastors to be diligent in the practice of their office is that the Lord has given no ordinary proof of his love toward the church, by pouring out his own blood for its sake. And when an elder profanes the sacred blood of Christ, and does not see that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is preached and that the saints are built up in the faith, they have made useless the

redemption of Jesus Christ, acquired by him in the shedding of his blood, so far as they are concerned.” Fortunately, we know that in the divine providence of a sovereign God, they cannot overthrow the divine purposes. But so far as we are concerned, if we’re not faithful in preaching the Word of God, if we’ve been called to preach or if we are elders, if we’re not faithful in feeding the church of God, we are doing despite to the grace of God itself. So what a magnificent charge that is to elders. “Take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost has made you an overseer, to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with the blood of his own one.” Elders are plural. Plurality of elders is the means by which the church is governed. And they are men appointed by the Holy Spirit. And they are feeding the church of God with, as Paul says, “the word of his grace.” May God, in Believers Chapel, always by his grace enable us to preach truly the word of His grace.

Now, a menacing future is referred to and we’ll only deal with this briefly this morning. Why should those elders take heed? “I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.” We have an expression, perhaps derived from this. We say, “He’s crying wolf.” We also know that it’s found in the fables, too. Well, Paul cries wolf. That’s what he does. He says, “After my departing, grievous wolves shall enter in among you.” Spirits, we’re living out in Texas folks, spiritual rustlers. That’s what you have. People who want to enter into the congregation where the saints of God are and rustle a few of the sheep off to follow them. Unfortunately, they are often successful because the sheep are sheep, they’re dumb. Dumb. That’s right. What a beautiful way to describe us. Sheep. We wander, we wander, we wander, we keep wandering, we wander, we wander, finally we fall into the hole or walk over a cliff. So Paul says, “Look, wolves are coming in. Wolves tear and pillage and savage the flock. Grievous wolves.” That word is a word that sometimes means simply “heavy.” But most of the time in a context like this, it means fierce, ferocious. And they are called “the reverend doctor so and so,” who graduated from such and such a theological seminary. That’s the name that you give them. You don’t say, “The reverend doctor Mr. Wolf.” [Laughter] No. If we were called wolves, we sheep would start running.

We might not be able to escape them, but we would run. So the wolves come, not as wolves, but as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11, they come as “ministers of righteousness.” To think, the reverend doctor so and so is actually a wolf. But he is, if he doesn’t preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, if his message doesn’t tally with the Word of God. From without and from within.

Do you know that even from within Believers Chapel? The history, incidentally, of all apostasy is the history of error arising from without and from within. Almost every theological school that has ever gone astray, has gone astray with a Christian president. Study history. Every church, true church of Christian doctrine, has gone astray with Christians at the head. The Old Testament is a picture of the departure of Israel in so many ways with believing men involved; weakness from without, and from within.

Dr. L. Nelson Bell, a remarkable man, missionary to China, medical missionary for many years, very faithful preacher of the gospel. My family had a summer home in Hendersonville, North Carolina and Dr. Bell would be on the radio every Sunday morning, I would hear him in the summertime when we were up there on vacation. He’d be preaching over the Black Mountain radio station and, always forthright and firm in the preaching of the gospel. Some years ago, he, Dr. Bell lived in Montreat, North Carolina, in his later days, where the Presbyterians have their gathering, their well-known gathering place. He describes some meetings. I’m not sure they were at Montreat, so I cannot say where they were. But he describes a Christian conference, which he decided to attend. It was in another Christian denomination.

But he said, “We gathered. There were about three hundred people present.” He said, “The meeting started out very well. There were approximately three hundred people present. The two opening hymns were “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.”” He said, “The opening prayer was good and the atmosphere worshipful and expectant.” And I should have preceded this by saying that Dr. Bell was often criticized by some of his ministerial friends who felt that he was unduly critical of some preachers, for not preaching the gospel as he felt it should be preached. So he said, “The speaker was a prominent bishop brought from another state for this

series of talks. And when he read his text, he said he felt very thankful because he felt a good message was coming, since the text was, “Wherefore Jesus also that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate.” But, he said, his anticipation of a blessing was soon dashed. The effect of the cross was developed as follows: the cross purifies us as it shames us. Second point: The cross purifies us as we see God’s love in it. And third: The cross purifies us as in the cross we see the meaning of life.”

Now, it’s obvious to anyone who has studied the doctrine of atonement, that this is a moral influence theory of the atonement. And no provision whatsoever is stated for the sin of man. No provision for the divine penalty and judgment upon sin. The wages of sin is death. And, therefore, there must be the payment of a price.

So Dr. Bell went on to say, he looked around the audience. There were two people that he knew in the audience, particularly. One had passed through a very difficult experience of marital difficulties. Another one had some particular problems. He said, there was no word in this that would minister to them, to the needs that they had.

And then, Dr. Bell, who was a medical doctor, went on to say, “If a surgeon operated on a patient for acute appendicitis, and left the appendix in, he would be sued for malpractice and fraud. But,” he said, “If a minister preaches to sinning and lost men a gospel that cannot save, well, he may be made a bishop.” [Laughter]

You know, it would be nice if ministers could be sued for malpractice within the Christian denomination. We are seeing some interesting things today. Christians are being sued for malpractice. One in California, very well-known to some of you, is being sued because of the psychological advice that he gave to someone. But I have not yet seen any Christian minister sued for malpractice, for not preaching the gospel of the grace of God. But, to my mind, though that would probably be very contrary to our constitution, to my mind, that’s really what the Christian church, in its organizational structure should make provision for. We are, as preachers of the word of God, to hold our message true to the Word of God.

Now, Paul says, the only safeguard is watch. “Therefore watch,” he says. The safeguard against the wolf from without, against the traitor from within, is the daily caring admonition. Paul said in another place, “Whom we preach, warning every man, teaching every man, in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.”

Please remember, my dear Christian friends, there is only one gospel of the grace of God. There is only one way of salvation, through the Lord Jesus Christ. The mushroom gospels of the hour, as the ages go by, can never save. The changing moons of biblical doctrine can never save. The only gospel that saves is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, who in the plan and purpose of God, offered himself up a sacrifice, as a sweet smelling savor for sinners to the Lord God.

If you’re a sinner and you know you’re a sinner, you may come to Christ and receive the pardon, the forgiveness of sins, on the basis of the acknowledgement of your need, and on the basis of the acknowledgement of the sufficiency of the blood that was shed. As Paul says, “The church of God, which he hath purchased with his own one.”

If you are here this morning, without Christ, come to him! Believe in him! Cast aside your trust in the church! In your good works! In your baptism! In your observance of the ordinances! In your education, in your culture, or what ever it is in which you have placed your trust! Come to Christ! Lean upon Him!

Find that the Lord God answers with the gift of eternal life and the transformation of your nature completed when the Lord comes by his grace, you ultimately are fashioned into his glorious likeness. Come to Christ! Believe in him.

Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these magnificent words that the apostle gave to the Ephesian elders. O God, we pray for our elders that they may be men who take heed to themselves and to all the flock of God, over which and among whom the Holy Spirit has made them overseers; may they feed us with the true feed of the gospel of the grace of God, all the counsel of

God, as Paul says. And, Father, we pray for the whole church of Jesus Christ, what we pray for our church that where the Lord Jesus Christ is named, that there may be faithfulness to the message that he has given us to give. If there are some here who have never believed in Christ, Lord, by the marvelous drawing power of effectual grace, bring them to Him, whom to know is life eternal.

We pray, in His name. Amen.