

Failure to Ask Counsel of the Lord

By Rev. Brian Huizinga

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Hope Protestant Reformed Church

1307 E Brockton Ave
Redlands, CA 92374

Website: www.hopeprc.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/evangelismhopeprc

We turn in the sacred Scriptures this morning to Joshua 9.

1 And it came to pass, when all the kings which were on this side Jordan, in the hills, and in the valleys, and in all the coasts of the great sea over against Lebanon, the Hittite, and the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite, heard thereof; 2 That they gathered themselves together, to fight with Joshua and with Israel, with one accord. 3 And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai, 4 They did work wilily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up; 5 And old shoes and clouted upon their feet, and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and mouldy. 6 And they went to Joshua unto the camp at Gilgal, and said unto him, and to the men of Israel, We be come from a far country: now therefore make ye a league with us. 7 And the men of Israel said unto the Hivites, Peradventure ye dwell among us; and how shall we make a league with you? 8 And they said unto Joshua, We are thy servants. And Joshua said unto them, Who are ye? and from whence come ye? 9 And they said unto him, From a very far country thy servants are come because of the name of the LORD thy God: for we have heard the fame of him, and all that he did in Egypt, 10 And all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites, that were beyond Jordan, to Sihon king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, which was at Ashtaroth. 11 Wherefore our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spake to us, saying, Take victuals with you for the journey, and go to meet them, and say unto them, We are your servants: therefore now make ye a league with us. 12 This our bread we took hot for our provision out of our houses on the day we came forth to go unto you; but now, behold, it is dry, and it is mouldy: 13 And these bottles of wine, which we filled, were new; and, behold, they be rent: and these our garments and our shoes are become old by reason of the very long journey. 14 And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD. 15 And Joshua made peace with them, and made a league with them, to let them live: and the princes of the congregation sware unto them. 16 And it came to pass at the

end of three days after they had made a league with them, that they heard that they were their neighbours, and that they dwelt among them. 17 And the children of Israel journeyed, and came unto their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, and Chephirah, and Beeroth, and Kirjathjearim. 18 And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes. 19 But all the princes said unto all the congregation, We have sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them. 20 This we will do to them; we will even let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath which we sware unto them. 21 And the princes said unto them, Let them live; but let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water unto all the congregation; as the princes had promised them. 22 And Joshua called for them, and he spake unto them, saying, Wherefore have ye beguiled us, saying, We are very far from you; when ye dwell among us? 23 Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God. 24 And they answered Joshua, and said, Because it was certainly told thy servants, how that the LORD thy God commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land from before you, therefore we were sore afraid of our lives because of you, and have done this thing. 25 And now, behold, we are in thine hand: as it seemeth good and right unto thee to do unto us, do. 26 And so did he unto them, and delivered them out of the hand of the children of Israel, that they slew them not. 27 And Joshua made them that day hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, and for the altar of the LORD, even unto this day, in the place which he should choose.

This is the inspired and infallible word of God.

The text for the sermon this morning is verse 14, particularly the latter half,

14 And the men took of their victuals, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD.

Beloved, in the Lord Jesus Christ, we office-bearers in the church are weak and sinful men and it is only by the grace of God through the Spirit of Jesus Christ that we can execute our offices in a way that pleases God. Because of our weakness, we all need instruction. We always need instruction and the Bible has many lessons to teach us from the lives of the Israelite men of old. Some examples are good and exemplary and worthy of emulation. Some examples are poor and bad and reason for warning. All, though, are for our teaching and instruction, for 1 Corinthians 10:11 says that all the happenings in Old Testament Israel, "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."

Joshua 9 was written for many purposes, one of them according to the Bible was this: that we be admonished and that's true of all of the happenings of Old Testament Israel. They were written for our admonishment and the particular word to us this morning comes from the negative example recorded in verse 14 that the men of Israel "asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD." Joshua 9 is about the deception of the Gibeonites, that familiar story, but the principle and chief lesson from which we must learn and which admonishes us this morning is this negative example in verse 14, that they "asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD." That's the fundamental lesson. The warning is, "Don't fail to ask counsel of the LORD." The duty: ask counsel of the LORD.

So in this installation service, let us consider the 14th verse of Joshua 9 this morning. We take as our theme: "Failure to Ask Counsel of the Lord." Notice, first, Gibeon's deception; second, Israel's sin; and third, our warning.

Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness and to the land of Canaan. Then Joshua became the new leader and he would lead the people into the land of Canaan and they must fight the inhabitants so that they can take their rightful possession, the inheritance of God. Before they crossed the Jordan, they defeat Sihon and Og, two mighty kings. Then they cross the Jordan and enter into the land of Canaan proper and there God gives them two outstanding victories over Jericho and Ai, two mighty cities.

These impressive victories given to them by the hand of God caught the attention of all of the Canaanite people. According to verse 1, the Hittites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, and so they gathered together in their fear to fight against Joshua and Israel. They all did except one group of people in the land of Canaan, the Gibeonites, they responded differently.

The Gibeonites were a group of Canaanites living in the land. According to verse 17, they occupied four cities: Gibeon, Chephirah, and Beeroth, and Kirjathjearim. Joshua 10:2 tells us that "Gibeon was a great city, as one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai, and all the men thereof were mighty." This kingdom of Gibeon with its chief city, Gibeon, was an impressive kingdom and group of people. It is estimated that the city of Gibeon was no more than 14 miles west of Jericho, in other words, the children of Israel had just defeated Jericho and just defeated Ai and now they're gathered in that region at the camp of Gilgal and no more than 14 miles to the west is this mighty kingdom of Gibeon and the Gibeonites know what's going to happen. The children of Israel are moving in this direction and Gibeon is next. They are in line. They are afraid as all the Canaanites are afraid, but they opt for an alternate method: they will not fight against Israel, they will try to make a league with the Israelites so that they can live and they will attempt to make this league through deception, indeed they did.

The Gibeonites were crafty. First of all, they got all dressed up. They were the neighbors. They were Israel's neighbors now but they got all dressed up, verse 3 and following, "And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai, They did work wily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old

sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles," animal skins for wine but they were, "old, and rent, and bound up; And old shoes and clouted upon their feet," that is, old, tattered sandals that were all patched up, they put them on their feet, "and old garments upon them; and all the bread of their provision was dry and mouldy." First, they got all dressed up like deceivers do, they get all dressed up.

Secondly, they uttered a lie, a bold-faced lie. Verse 6, "they went to Joshua unto the camp at Gilgal, and said unto him, and to the men of Israel, We be come from a far country," and so they say again now in verse 12, "This our bread we took hot for our provision out of our houses on the day we came forth to go unto you; but now, behold, it is dry, and it is mouldy: And these bottles of wine, which we filled, were new; and, behold, they be rent: and these our garments and our shoes are become old by reason of the very long journey." We've come from a long long ways away, now make a league with us. Verse 7, "make a league." Literally, verse 6, "make a covenant with us; enter into a relationship with us; join affinity with us; be one with us." The Israelites are a bit skeptical, verse 7, "the men of Israel said unto the Hivites, Peradventure ye dwell among us," perhaps you live right here among us, "and how shall we make a league with you?" They lied. They lied: we're from a far country. Deceivers do that, they lie.

In the third place, they used flattery. Their opening remarks, verse 4, they pretended that they were ambassadors or messengers from a far land and they're trying to flatter the children of Israel, this little nation who now comes into the land of Canaan and immediately upon their entrance they are receiving a delegation from some people of a far away country. They're trying to flatter the children of Israel. And they do it again in verse 8, "We are thy servants." You'll be the king. You guys can be the rulers, we will just be the servants. Trying to flatter. Deceivers do that, they flatter. They pretend to honor and give reverence. Flattery.

In the fourth place, they play the game called dodge the question. Joshua makes a good beginning in verse 8, he says, "Who are ye? and from whence come ye? And they said unto him, From a very far country." They won't answer the question. "From a very far country," now change the subject, "thy servants are come because of the name of the LORD thy God." Who are you? And they dodged the question. Deceivers do that. They dodge the question.

In the fifth place, they feign reverence to Jehovah. Verse 9, "because of the name of the LORD thy God," that's why we've come, feigning reverence to Jehovah. Deceivers do that. They feign a reverence and an honor for holy things.

And finally, they carefully word their answers. Verse 10, "We came because we heard what you did to Sihon and Og." Not because of what you did to Jericho and Ai, because then immediately the children of Israel would have said, "Wait a minute, we just conquered Jericho and Ai and if you're from a far country, how do you know what we just did?" They're aware of that so they don't make mention of Jericho and Ai but they said, "We heard what you did to Og and Sihon way back on the other side of the Jordan."

They carefully word their answers so as not to reveal their true identity. The Gibeonites were deceivers.

There is a lesson here in deception. Once the first lie is uttered, there are two options: 1. repent and say, "I'm sorry," and be forgiven; or 2. thus beginneth the multiplication of lies. Lie to cover up lie, to cover up lie, to cover up lie, to cover up lie, and now dress up and bold-faced lies and flattery and dodge the question and feign the reverence and carefully word the answer. The Gibeonites were deceivers and the result was not good. They deceived the children of Israel.

Verse 14, "And the men took of their victuals." Oh, they let their guard down and now here they come close to the Gibeonites and they start taking of their victuals, their provisions, and then comes the sad word of verse 15, "And Joshua made peace with them, and made a league with them, to let them live." The Gibeonites were deceivers and Israel sinned.

The chief and principle word from which we are to be admonished this morning concerns not the deception of the Gibeonites but the response of Israel to the Gibeonites. As a matter of fact, the central significance of the text is not the response of Israel, it is the failed response of Israel and what Israel failed to do, the whole story as it begins in verse 1 is building up to a climax and you're asking yourself a question in your head as you read through the chapter, "What will Israel do?" Deception after deception after deception. You keep asking, "What is Israel going to do?" and the whole climax builds up until verse 14 and we read, "and asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD." That was Israel's sin, they did not ask counsel of the LORD.

The chief and principle sin of Israel was not that they were deceived by deceivers. Israel was deceived. They were deceived but that was not their principle sin, in fact, being deceived as such is not necessarily a sin. It can be. The New Testament repeatedly says, "Let no man deceive you," because one can be so careless and so foolish that he is deceived and then he's at fault, but being deceived as such is not necessarily a sin because one can use all wisdom and precaution and still be deceived when a wicked intent is so carefully cloaked in words and actions and God in his sovereignty may have one deceived at no fault of his own.

Israel was deceived. That was not their chief sin. The chief and principle sin of the Israelites was not that they made a covenant with the Gibeonites. They made a covenant with the Gibeonites, that was sin, it was not their chief and principle sin. They did make a covenant which they were not supposed to do. Deuteronomy 20:10 and following, a passage too lengthy to read this morning, reveals a provision made. The general rule was to go forth and kill all of the Canaanites. There was this provision: if some wanted to make peace, then the Israelites could make peace with them but they must immediately subject them to servitude and make them their servants, their slaves. So here comes Joshua and the Israelites and the Gibeonites come and they want to make peace. There was a provision whereby the Israelites could have made peace with them and immediately made them their slaves. That's not what Joshua did. He didn't simply make

peace with them and then make them his slaves, he made a covenant with them and allowed them to live as one people among them. That was a sin.

Exodus 23:32 is one of many passages in the law of Moses which states something like this, "Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor with their gods." That they made a league with the Gibeonites, regardless of who the Gibeonites were, that they made a league with anyone was a sin. It was not their chief sin, it was not their principle sin, that they made a league with the Canaanites was only the result, the inevitable result and the sad conclusion of their primary, chief and principle sin. Their chief sin is recorded in verse 14, "and they asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD." That is Israel's sin.

When confronted by the Gibeonites, they didn't go to the Lord. They didn't inquire of wisdom from the Lord. They did not ask help from the Lord. They did not cry unto the Lord for help. They ignored the Lord. They took it upon themselves to determine what they would do now with respect to the Gibeonites; they would handle this matter by themselves but they did not stop and say, "We must go to the LORD first." And that was their sin.

Joshua knew better. Numbers 27:18 and following reveal how God told Moses the day Moses anointed Joshua to be the new leader of Israel, to go to the priest and ask counsel of the Lord and they did that and this is what would happen, Numbers 27:21, "And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the LORD: at his word shall they go out," and so forth. Then Numbers 27:22 tells us that Moses did this as was commanded of him. The day Joshua was ordained, Moses took him to the priest and they asked counsel of the Lord. What that meant was that you go to the priest who has the law of God and the Urim and the Thummim and ask him of the will of God and God was pleased to reveal his will to the people through the priest who had the law and the Urim and Thummim and that's what it meant to "ask counsel at the mouth of the LORD."

Go to the priest, Joshua and Israel did not. Had they, they would not have been deceived. Maybe they never would have found out who the Gibeonites were but they would not have done something foolish, they would not have been deceived so as to do something that the law of God forbade. And had they "asked counsel at the mouth of the LORD" by going to the priest, they certainly would not have made an oath and entered into a covenant with another nation outside of Israel herself. They failed to "ask counsel of the LORD."

That was their chief and principle sin and this was serious. It was serious, first of all, because in this incident Joshua fails to show the people Jesus. Joshua was the outstanding type of Jesus Christ as the leader and captain of Israel. Hebrews 2:10 calls Jesus the captain of our salvation. Joshua was the captain of Israel who was called to represent Christ and in this incident he failed to show the wisdom and the discretion of Jesus Christ. He failed to show the people Christ and that made the sin all the more serious.

In the second place, this sin was serious because Joshua and Israel made a common mistake of putting their subjective feelings in the moment above the objective law of God. The sad sad reality is that every person in Israel had just heard the law. The last two verses of chapter 8, "And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them." Right before the Gibeonites had appeared, Joshua had just read the entire law to all of the Israelites. The law was ringing in their ears, "Don't make a covenant with the nations." That would have been read in the law. "Go to the priests who have the Urim and Thummim and the law of God to ask of the will of God." They would have heard all of these things in the law, having those things ringing in their ears and now here come the Gibeonites and they look so genuine and so sincere and so honest, and look at their sandals and their mouldy bread and, here, let's try some of your victuals. And the emotions start going and the feelings and there are all the images and the words, and surely these poor, weary travelers are genuine and sincere and we can join affinity with them. They got caught up in the subjective feelings of the moment so that they ignored the objective law of God which had just been read and that aggravates their sin. The law which would have told them, "ask counsel of the LORD," and yet they still failed to ask counsel of the Lord because they got caught up in that moment.

Finally, this sin is so serious because it is at root pride and arrogance to think they know what to do. Pride not to stop and acknowledge Jehovah and ask for guidance from Jehovah, the Jehovah who had just delivered them from Jericho and Ai and given the cities into their hands. Jericho, Ai, Jehovah gave them those cities and now here comes Gibeon and they ignore Jehovah and they don't "ask counsel at the mouth of the LORD." The explanation is pride and arrogance and so they were deceived because they "asked not counsel of the LORD."

Jehovah God in his graciousness by his almighty providence, worked out the situation such that the Gibeonites would be subjected to servitude and become hewers of wood and drawers of water in the nation of Israel and they would serve all the people of Israel for the good of Israel. God worked that all out. He would graciously forgive the Israelites and he would work this all out for their advantage in the end, nevertheless, there were the Gibeonites cutting wood and hauling water and every day they were a testimony to Joshua of his failure. "They're here and we failed. We failed to ask counsel of the LORD." This was a serious sin.

And now there's a warning for us this morning. There are all kinds of lessons to be drawn from Joshua 9. We will not treat the whole outcome of the story this morning, although there are significant lessons to be learned from the outcome. 1. The striking revelation of how the leaders of Israel swore an oath and would not go back on their oath. An important point for office-bearers who make vows. They would not go back. And all kinds of lessons to be learned from the outcome but we leave that aside this morning to focus on the 14th verse which reveals their principle sin, and out of that we draw the warning to us this morning. 1. Deception is real. That for all office-bearers, this warning:

deception is real. "No, he would never..." Oh, you don't think so? "They would never...." Well, don't be so sure. Joshua 9 gives this warning this morning: deception is real.

It's real in the church. There is no person sitting here this morning, including myself, who is not capable of deception. We all have an old man of sin and everyone here is capable of the sin of deception. Their father, Jacob, Israel himself was guilty of deception. Peter himself lied. And then came Ananias and Sapphira in the church, they lied. There is a warning this morning: in the church, deception is real. But that's not the chief warning of the text because the primary application this morning has to do with those in the outside who come to the church and say, "We want to make a league with you." Joshua 9 says, "Be warned. Deception is real."

"I want to make a league with you and become a member of this church. I like the doctrines and the practices here. I want to be a member." Alright, very well. Remember Joshua 9, though: deception is real.

"I want to make a league with you, as it were, for one day. I've come now and I want to take the Lord's Supper with you." Alright, very well. Remember Joshua 9: deception is real.

"We've been acquainted now with the Protestant Reformed churches in this denomination and your own church, we want to make a league with you. We want to join affinity. We want to be one with you. We love the doctrines of sovereign grace. They are new to us but we're beginning to understand them. We want to join your federation." Alright, very well. Joshua 9 says, don't forget this: deception is real.

Or maybe to the deaconate comes a man or a family with tattered garments and old sandals and mouldy bread and we need this much money for this. Alright, very well. Don't forget Joshua 9: deception is real.

The word of God this morning is not calling us to have this underlying assumption every time we meet someone from the outside who wants to make a league with us in whatever respect it may be, the word of God is not telling us we have to have this assumption. Everyone is a deceiver and we have to start with that assumption that everyone's trying to deceive us. That's not the assumption, that's not the rule and the principle that we suppose everyone is trying to deceive us when they come, but this is the warning: don't ignore the possibility of deception. Don't be so rash and so careless and so foolish so as to ignore the real possibility of deception.

Evil motives can be cloaked in convincing garb with broken tattered sandals and mouldy bread, and who ever would have thought these poor weary travelers with those old sandals and mouldy bread are our neighbors, our next-door neighbors? Who ever would have thought? Joshua 9 says this morning: be warned, deception is real.

The second warning of the text is this: do not fail to ask counsel of the Lord. Do not fail. The "mouth of the LORD" in the text ultimately refers to Jesus Christ himself. He is the

mouth of Jehovah. He is the Word of Jehovah. Jesus is. Ultimately it is said of Jesus in Proverbs 8:14, "Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom: I am understanding; I have strength." Jesus Christ is the Word of God, he's the mouth of God.

He has all counsel and wisdom and knowledge and understanding and our calling is to go to God so that God will give us the wisdom of Christ, the counsel of Christ, and God is pleased to do that in four different ways. First of all, God gives to us counsel, to the office-bearers he gives counsel through prayer. The counsel of Jesus Christ through prayer and always praying in humility, "Lord God, give to us wisdom, the wisdom of Christ, to do the work of the church and in each particular work, give us wisdom." And asking in prayer, the Lord is pleased to give counsel, to give wisdom and instruction through prayer.

In the second place, we use the Scriptures. Of course, we do, they are the word of Jesus Christ and so the office-bearers must be well-versed in the Scriptures so that they know the principles of the Scriptures. And now, how do the principles of Scripture shed light on this and how must they be brought to bear on this particular work? They have to know the Scriptures and God is pleased to give counsel through the Bible. That's our great counselor, through the Bible. Ask the Bible, "What must we do?" and God gives counsel through the Scriptures.

In the third place, we must consult counselors. Proverbs 24:6, "For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in multitude of counsellors there is safety." Where do we get the counsel? From one another. God gives many counselors. In other words, the offices of the church may not be ruled by one man. One man might carry the day and have the say-so in all the work of the church, but God gives a goodly number of elders and a goodly number of deacons, and in the work they talk, they discuss, they deliberate and each man has his own gifts and wisdom and he brings them to bear on a particular work and in that way God is pleased to give counsel. Ask counsel of the Lord. Pray. Go to the Scriptures and deliberate as counselors and in that way God gives counsel.

But not merely the men in the church in the consistory room, God gives us a host of counselors. There are experienced former office-bearers. There are professors of theology. There are other ministers. There are all kinds of men who can be consulted for their wisdom, counselors.

Not only that, there are deceased men who have gone to glory now but they've left all of their counsel in books. We have the creeds. We have the church order. We have the church order commentary. We have past synodical decisions. Old Standard Bearer articles. Book after book after book and all kinds of literature and new books being written. In them, all kinds of counsel and wisdom that God is pleased to use. "Ask counsel from the mouth of the LORD," from Jesus Christ, and he gives it through literature and books.

And finally, God gives counsel through the asking of questions. Joshua made a good beginning, verse 8, "Who are ye and from whence come ye?" Unfortunately, he stopped.

Ask questions. It was only three days later when the true identity of the Gibeonites was revealed. Only three days later. If they had only asked counsel of the Lord he may have revealed to them something that caused them to go back to the Gibeonites and ask more questions and it would have been plain to them who they are. Ask questions, 10 questions, 20 questions, ask 100 questions. Research. Inquire. Ask questions and in that way God is pleased to give counsel.

The warning: do not fail to "ask counsel of the LORD." This is not the warning, 'Do not be deceived.' God in his sovereignty may be pleased to have the church deceived. The warning is not, "Do not be deceived," the warning is, "Do not be deceived because you failed to ask counsel of the LORD."

This history may put fear in office-bearers: deception is real. There is encouragement: God is God. God is God. God in his sovereignty brought the Gibeonites to Israel for his own purpose, according to his own counsel. God brought the Gibeonites. God cursed the Gibeonites, verse 23, they were cursed and God saw to it that his people, Israel, were delivered from the Gibeonites so that they were not destroyed. Here's the encouragement from the text, from the broad picture of the history: God is God. Sovereign God is sovereign God.

Number 2: Jesus is Jesus. Jesus, the head and captain of Israel and the church is not Joshua who fails, and Reverend So-and-so who will fail, and Elder and Deacon So-and-so who will fail. Jesus is not that man or that man, Jesus is Jesus, the Son of God who has all wisdom, who warred with the great deceiver himself and who defeated him in the wilderness, and went to the cross, and he crushed the head of the great deceiver, and there he paid for all of our sins when we do fail, and then he rose again from the dead with great power to equip the Israelites, the office-bearers of God, so that we have ability to do the work. That's the leader and captain of Israel, not Joshua or any man, but Jesus and Jesus is Jesus, the Son of God. That's our confidence.

And this: the church is the church. God is God, Jesus is Jesus and the church is the church. Founded in eternity. Redeemed at the cross. Preserved throughout all time and history so that even the gates of hell and the great deceiver, Satan himself, cannot prevail against God's church. That's our confidence. The church is the church and God through Jesus will preserve the church in the way of our asking counsel of him and he is always pleased to give it. "Lord, give us counsel." Amen.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we recognize all of the inadequacies and how unsuitable we are as Joshua of old and yet, nevertheless, thou art so faithful a God, pleased to work through means. This is not necessary. Thou couldst rule the church of thyself and thou dost, but through means. Be pleased, O God, to care for this church through the office-bearers that thou hast given to us. Equip them, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.