

Acts 20:17-38

God's Interest in His Church

The church of God...purchased with his own blood – v. 28

This section in the book of Acts presents to us one of the most dramatic and heart-rending scenes in all the New Testament. This is Paul's final goodbye to the elders of Ephesus. So we read Paul's words in v. 25 *And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more.* The heartache of the scene is further magnified when we read in vv. 37, 38 *And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck, and kissed him, Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more.*

So we have in these verses an elder's meeting – a final elders meeting conducted by Paul who was an Apostle and an elder with the elders of Ephesus. In modern day churches the elders of most local churches meet privately to discuss sensitive issues pertaining to the spiritual well-being of those under their care. But in the passage before us in Acts 20 we find an elders meeting that we are all invited to attend.

This is certainly a passage that elders and potential elders in a church would do well to know. This is a charge in particular to them. And they are charged in this portion of Scripture to take heed to themselves and to the flock of God. They are charged to feed the flock of God and they're charged to watch over the flock of God. The Holy Ghost, according to v. 28 is the One that has made them overseers which literally means *bishops*. This title depicts in particular their responsibility to exercise oversight of the flocks under their care.

What I'm interested in this morning, however, is not so much the functions of elders as I'm interested in the designation that Paul assigns to the church. Notice from v. 28 that the church is called *the church of God*. And notice also that it's the church that is said to be *purchased with his own blood*. The church of God, you could say, purchased with the blood of God.

We certainly find in this statement a strong emphasis on the deity of Christ. Such is the connection between the humanity and deity of Christ that the blood which is attributed to his humanity may, in this instance, be attributed to his deity. *The church of God* our text reads *which he* – i.e. *God hath purchased with his own blood*.

The church, or the people of God that make up the church, can be said, based on this text to be the purchased possession of God. This is certainly one of the things that we're called upon to remember around the Lord's table. We're to remember that we're God's purchased possession and we're to remember that the price of that purchase is found in the blood of Christ.

Paul draws from that simple and sublime truth twice in 1 Corinthians in order to exhort the Corinthians in two particular ways. *For ye are bought with a price*, he says in 1Cor.

6:20 *therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.* And in the next chapter he says in 7:23 *Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men.*

The fact that you are bought with a price and that you are the purchased possession of God means that God takes a very special interest in you and in his church. And this interest is what I want you to think upon this morning in preparation for the Lord's table. My theme, simply put is this:

God Takes Very Special Interest in His Church

And I want to think this morning on the way this special interest is demonstrated by God. Consider with me first of all that this interest is demonstrated:

I. By the Fact that God Possesses His Church

Notice the phrase *church of God*. I believe the phrase can be interpreted as a genitive phrase showing possession. In other words the church belongs to God. Had Harold Camping had any appreciation for that simple and obvious truth he could never have harbored the notion that the church would ever cease to be. He failed to consider that by saying the church had ceased he was calling Christ himself a failure. He was saying that Christ had made a very expensive purchase only to see that purchase wither away.

If you look at the church in its corruption then you may make allowance for such a notion but if you look at the plain statements of Scripture then you could never fall to such an error. In that very familiar statement Christ makes in Mt 16:18 we find another statement where Christ Himself claims the church as his possession: *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

He didn't say he would build Peter's church. He didn't say he would build the Baptist church or the Presbyterian church or the Methodist church. He didn't say he would build Harold Camping's ridiculous notion about the church. He certainly didn't say that he would build the Roman Catholic church but he said he would build his church. And the reason he will build it should be obvious by the text itself – he will build it because it belongs to him.

And the reason it belongs to him is given in our text in Acts 20:28. It belongs to him because he has purchased it. *The church of God...purchased with his own blood.* He paid a very high price to purchase the church. He paid with his blood which is tantamount to saying that he paid with his life for the life of the flesh is in the blood. If this indeed be the case, then, it means that Christ takes a very intense interest not merely in the church as an institution – I don't believe Christ shed his blood for an institution but he shed his blood for a people. The church, you see, is Christ's people.

Now we'll see in the course of this study that under each heading that we consider there is a corresponding function that the church performs. Under the heading, God possesses

his church, the corresponding church function is for the preacher to remind the church of that simple but sublime truth. This is why we have the Lord's supper. We are to remember that we belong to Christ. We are to remember that he paid a very high price for you and me to belong to him.

And the reason the church must ever remind herself of this truth is because when we lose sight of it, or when we fail to adequately appreciate it then we become tempted to believe that God places little or no value on us. Stop and think about it for a moment – why would God place value on us? We came into this world as rebels against him. Even as Christians we come short of his glory and fall prey to sin. When you contemplate your sins and shortcomings and begin to try to count the number of times you've seemingly failed God then it tempts you to think that you have no value to God.

And of course the devil plays his part in seeking to convince you of that. If the devil can convince you that you're a failure then he'll effectively render you useless in God's service and will even get you to doubt whether or not you're really a Christian. What a blessing, then, to have a sacrament ordained by God that's designed not to call us to the remembrance of our successes or our failures. If we dwell on what we think are our successes we only tempt ourselves to pride and if we dwell on what we think are our failures we tempt ourselves to despair.

We do much better to think upon Christ's success and Christ's success is readily seen in that he successfully made a purchase. He purchased you and he purchased me. At the moment he made the pronouncement, *It is finished*, then you and I became his purchased possession. He purchased us at a high price – the price of his blood. And because he purchased us it means that he owns us – it means that he places very high value on us – not because of our intrinsic value but because of the price he was willing to pay to redeem us.

And if he redeemed you then he will never let you go. He will never discard you. He will never deem you to be worthless or useless. There is nothing that so contributes to a Christian being downcast as the thought that he's useless to God. You should never view yourself that way as a Christian. Indeed you should count it to be sin to count yourself that way. Christ paid too high a price for you to consider yourself that way. And so he will never leave you or forsake you. He will instead tend to you and prune you and enable you to be fruitful in his kingdom.

The first thing we see, then, to convince us that God takes an intense interest in us is the truth that Christ owns us. He paid a high price for us and we count it as our freedom that we have been made servants to Christ and to God. Would you consider with me next that God shows his interest in the church:

II. By the Way He Provides for the Church

Remember the context that I mentioned in my introduction. This is an elders meeting. We're told in v. 17 *And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the*

church. And the truth that comes out in our text is that elders are a part of the provision that God has made for his church.

To the fleshly eye elders may be viewed as those that are simply elected by a congregation. But if those elections are viewed correctly which means that they're viewed spiritually and not politically then underlying the election and ordination of an elder is the recognition that at the end of the day they are made or appointed by the Holy Ghost. Again the words of our text in v. 28 *Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.*

So the Lord's interest is demonstrated by this appointment. You remember I said each point in my message has a corresponding application of how the church functions. Here that function is for elders to oversee God's flock and to feed the flock. What this means is that they function as under shepherds to the chief shepherd and bishop of their souls. And they should be viewed in spite of their imperfections they should be viewed at the very least as an indication that Christ himself takes a very serious interest in his people.

That interest is magnified when you consider the main function especially of a teaching elder. Look at how Paul reflects on his care of the saints at Ephesus from vv. 17-21: *Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, 19 Serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: 20 And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, 21 Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Here is God's provision to the church. Here is the proof of God's ongoing interest in the church. He provides the church with the ministry of the gospel. And when I say the ministry of the gospel I mean that the church is the recipient of that ministry as well as the conveyor of that ministry. This is the point that receives the strongest emphasis in this passage. The passage begins with Paul reflecting on the way he ministered the gospel to them and the passage ends with a benediction in which Paul commends them to that same gospel. Look at the words of v. 32 *And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.*

I love this designation of the gospel *the word of his grace*. God has been and is and will be gracious to his church which means that he never fails to forgive us our sins and he'll never leave us or forsake us. He will, without fail, build you up and give you an inheritance and sanctify you. And this will be accomplished by your knowledge and appreciation of his grace.

Do you see the link between being commended to God and being commended to the word of his grace? The two things go hand in hand. And we know in our experience that it is as God works through the word of his grace that we are built up in the faith and we have

the sure hope of an eternal inheritance and we are sanctified. It is as we appropriate the promises of his grace that these things are accomplished and our lives are transformed.

And the place our sanctification takes us is given to us in v. 35 *I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.* Here is one of many statements that our Lord made which was not recorded in the gospels but which was known, nevertheless, by his disciples and comes to us only in the book of Acts. *It is more blessed to give than to receive.*

In a sense that's a sermon in itself. I'll only remark on it by saying that it is demonstrated to us in the elements of communion. The Lord has given to us his body. His body was broken for you. And the Lord has given to us his blood. His blood was shed for you. And the benefits of Christ's broken body and shed blood makes us spiritually rich. It may not make us materially rich, indeed, among those that are wealthy few are called we're told by Paul in 1Corinthians. But we have been made spiritually rich. And this equips us to be givers. Here is evidence of grace in a Christian's life – he's overcome being obsessed with himself and he lives in the truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive. I have made the remark in the past when we studied the book of Acts that there is no such thing as a Christian who has nothing to give.

One of my favorite verses in this book is found in Ac 3:6 *Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.* So long as you have the gospel you have something to give. Indeed you have something more valuable to give than all the silver and gold the world could afford you.

But I return to my point under this heading – God shows his interest in the church by his provision for the church. In that provision he has given us the gospel. In that provision he has given us the means to enjoy close fellowship with him. In that provision he has given us what we need for our spiritual lives. I love the way Peter expresses this in his second epistle 1:3,4 *According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.*

What wonderful provision God has made, then, for his church. Certainly the sacrament of the Lord's supper is a part of that provision. So that, when accompanied with the word of grace we are drawn ever closer to our God and Savior. So God shows his interest in the church by the fact that he possesses his church. It belongs to him. He will build it. And he shows his interest in the church by the provision he has made for the church – the oversight of elders and the ministry of the gospel. Such provision enables us to glorify and enjoy him. It remains for us to consider that God shows his interest in the church:

III. By the Way He Protects the Church

In a sense this point is subordinate to the previous point we just considered. For the way God protects his church is through the warnings he gives through his word. Notice the words of our text again but this time we'll include vv. 29,30 which shows us the reason for the charge Paul gives to the elders.

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. 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.

Enemies from without and subtle enemies that would arise from within – this is the warning Paul gives and this warning is given in accordance with the interest God takes in his church. God, you see, has gained the allegiance of his people through the love of Christ and it is his desire to keep that loyalty and allegiance. And there is the recognition in this statement that there will be forces to challenge that loyalty and allegiance.

I'm afraid that this is a matter in Christian ministry that too often is not taken seriously enough by Christians or by elders. And yet you see how much this issue weighed on Paul's heart when you read in v. 31 *Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.* These words make it plain, don't they, that Paul's warning was not merely a casual warning given just in passing. This issue so gripped his heart that it moved him to fervent and constant warnings – *night and day with tears.*

We have the benefit of church history to teach us how this very thing comes to pass. Men become attracted to personalities and even the pursuit of holiness becomes twisted in a way that denies the gospel. And in his interest for his people Christ assigns elders to watch for these things as well as the people of God in general. We're all to watch. We must all take heed. And we must fortify ourselves in the word of God's grace.

And here again, this communion table serves the purpose of enabling us to fortify ourselves against grievous wolves that would lead us astray. For here around this table we are called back to first principles and here around this table we are called back to the simplicity of the gospel. Here around this table we are reminded that we're sinners but we're sinners saved by grace – we're sinners but we're sinners bought with a price. We're vulnerable sinners yet we're joined to One that became one of us in order to provide for us all that we need for life in this world and for life in the world to come.

So we see very plainly from this passage of Scripture that God and Christ take a keen interest in the church. That interest is seen in the truth that God possesses the church – God provides for the church and God protects the church.

In our participation of the Lord's table we are given the privilege of responding to the interest that God takes in us by demonstrating by faith the interest that we take in Christ. As we partake of these elements this morning let's show that interest by testifying to God that we believe in his Son and that we love him because he first loved us.